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Tales of Waste and Woe

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Reviews by GEORGE KEARNS, JAMES FINN COTTER, DANA GIOIA, MONROE K. SPEARS.

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The Hudson Review regrets the death on June 1, 1982, of Bernhard DeBoer, who for more than thirty years distributed this magazine to newsstands and bookstores.

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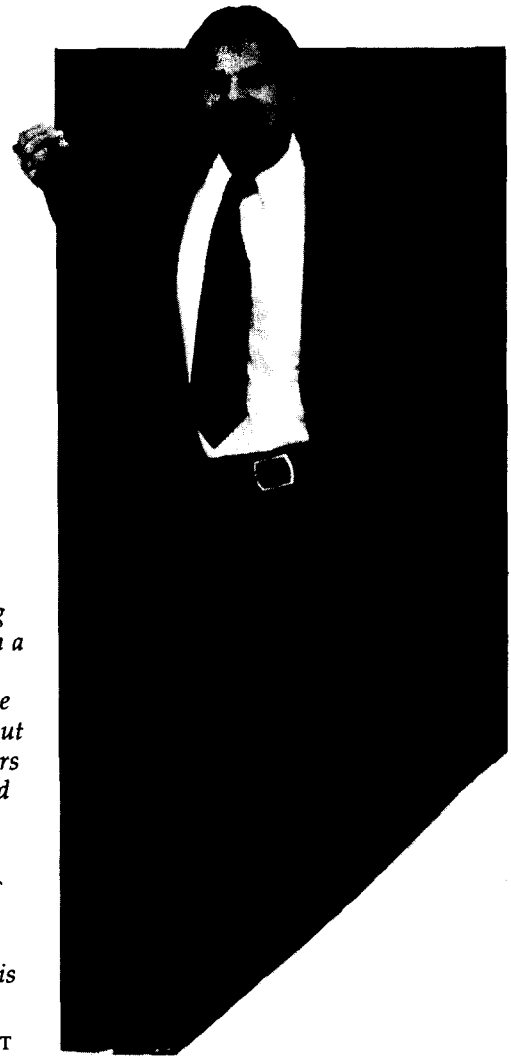

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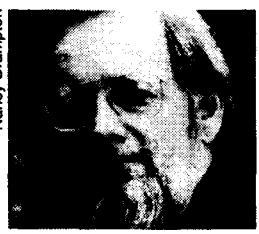

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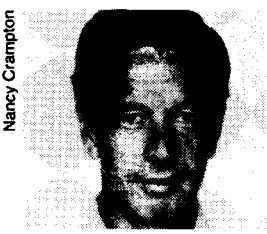

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ALFRED CORN

Corneille's *Le Cid*, Act One

Scene 1

CHIMENE:

Elvira, is your story really true?
Concealing nothing that he said to you?

ELVIRA:

Your father nods and smiles; he must approve.
He thinks Rodrigo merits all your love.
And once it's settled, this much I can say:
He never doubts his daughter will obey.

CHIMENE:

Let me hear them, recounted in your voice,
The words that prove he seconds my own choice.
Tell me again what we may hope to reach—
Oh please, recite once more that touching speech!
We never tire of being reassured
Our freedom to love is soon to be secured.
But has my father heard that there are two—
Don Sanche, Rodrigo—both in league with you?
I wonder whether he suspects a plot;
And knows which one I love, and which one not?

ELVIRA:

I tell him you're impartial in the matter:
Polite to both, but neither do you flatter.
Enticing, by no means! but then, not chill;
Respecting duty and your father's will.
Your conduct seemed to swell his heart with pride;
No one could doubt that he is satisfied.

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And yet, if you insist, I shall review
Just what he thinks of them, concerning you.
"Both men," he said, "might seek my daughter's hand.
"Their blood is noble, worthy of command.
"Though young, they have upheld, by every sign,
"The fame and splendor of their ancient line.
"Rodrigo stands and speaks in such a fashion
"As well proclaims his valor, grace and passion.
"His ancestors, of soldierly renown,
"Transferred to him at birth the victor's crown.
"His father's strength, as long as it could last,
"The age declared a marvel unsurpassed.
"We see that record graven on his brow,
"The deeds performed, a legend for us now.
"His son shows virtues of a similar bent:
"Chimène could marry him, with my consent."
No further would he then deliberate:
The council were assembling, he was late.
Yet, from his tone, I'd say he has decided.
His sentiments aren't evenly divided . . .
The king's to name a governor for the prince.
This post will be your father's, so he hints.
A foregone choice: his skill in arms was such,
What other candidate's deserved as much?
His brilliant exploits leave him without peer;
His claim to this reward is very clear.
Since Don Rodrigo's father is now concerned
To urge his suit, when council has adjourned,
Just see how long it takes him to decide!
Your deepest wish will soon be gratified.

CHIMENE:

And yet, it seems my troubled heart instead
Rejects this joy, and feels a heavy dread.
We know that fortune's actions are diverse:
With so much luck, I fear some great reverse.

ELVIRA:

Your fears, I'm sure, will soon be laid to rest.

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CHIMENE:

Well then, I'll wait and simply hope the best.

Scene 2 (*The Infanta, Leonora, Page*)

INFANTA:

Page, go to Chimène, and plainly say
I ask that she should wait for me today;
That her neglect of friends is less than kind.

LEONORA:

Madame, this question never leaves your mind.
Each time she comes you make the same demand:
To know just where her love and courtship stand.

INFANTA:

And with good reason; for I all but drove
Chimène to yield her reluctant heart to love.
She did. And then I made Rodrigo see
Chimène was not beneath his dignity.
My hand contrived to forge this tender chain,
And I must do my part to end their pain.

LEONORA:

Madame, one can surmise their happiness
Leaves you chagrined and, truly, to excess.
This love, in which they dream of bright tomorrows—
Does it perhaps weigh down your heart with sorrows?
The part you take, as if in their employ,
Might it be painful, witnessing their joy?
But I am indiscreet, and far too bold . . .

INFANTA:

My suffering doubles, being left untold.

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Then hear at last how fierce the struggle's been;
And know what trials of honor still remain!
Love is a tyrant before whom all must bow;
This young, this noble suitor I bestow—
I love him.

LEONORA:

Love him!

INFANTA:

Your hand here, on my heart.
See how its idol's name has made it start.
How it acknowledges him.

LEONORA:

Your pardon, Madame,
If I am disrespectful, quick to blame;
But should a princess, leaving her proper sphere,
Admit she loves a simple cavalier?
Think what the king, what all Castile would say!
Do you forget what father you betray?

INFANTA:

Ah no, my memory is in fact so good
I'd rather die than stoop beneath my blood.
Yet, as I might point out, a noble spirit
Is moved to love by nothing more than merit.
This passion, which you urge me to deny,
A thousand precedents could justify.
My wish is not, however, to insist:
Surprised by love, I must and will resist.
My father's king, I said; and thus for me
No marriage suits but one with royalty.
Yet, seeing that my heart remained the same,
I gave away the man I dared not claim.
With like attachments I ensnared Chimène.
I lit bright fires in them to put out mine.

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Oh yes! To end the strife my spirits house
I wait impatiently those wedding vows.
I plot against my heart but to defend it;
If hope engenders love, despair will end it.
A fire dies down when not supplied with fuel;
However sad my lot, however cruel,
After their wedding day has come and passed,
My hopes expire, my spirit's healed at last.
But now the pain I suffer is immense.
Against this passion, what is my defense?
I strive to renounce him, grieving that I do—
A secret torment guessed by none but you.
By love's iron rule I am, alas, constrained
To long in silence for one I have disdained.
My mind is gripped by contrary desire;
Though duty's strong, my heart is all on fire.
This bitter marriage I arranged by art
Will satisfy my pride, but breaks my heart.
My will and love both burn with flames so hot,
I am lost if they should marry or if not.

LEONORA:

Madame, there's nothing more I need to hear.
Please know I share the burdens that you bear.
The doubts I had are now all sympathy.
Yet, in this sweet and painful malady,
Your virtue has not really been defeated.
Resisting all assaults, the illness treated,
You will suppress the anguish that you feel.
Remember honor; in time your wounds will heal.
Trust in God; his justice rules all things
And will not overlook your sufferings.

INFANTA:

To lose all hope is all I hope to do.

PAGE:

At your request, Chimène has come to you.

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INFANTA:

Go now to meet her in the farther room.

LEONORA:

Will you stay here, reflecting on this gloom?

INFANTA:

No, no, I must, in spite of this displeasure,
Recover poise and try to seem at leisure.
I'll follow.
Heavenly Father, in this hour
Heal my ills by your redeeming power.
Give me repose, and make my honor sure:
The happiness of others be my cure.
Uniting them in conjugal estate
Will sever my bonds and end this harsh debate.
Now I must go; Chimène attends on me.
I shall be calmer in her company.

Scene 3 (*The Count, Don Diego de Bivar*)

COUNT:

Well then, you've won: the king—what charity!—
Awards to you what should have come to me.
The governor of his son he says you are.

DON DIEGO:

This honor added to the name Bivar
Is proof the king is just, an office tendered
To show his gratitude for services rendered.

COUNT:

However high they sit, kings still are men,
As apt to err as other gentlemen.

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And this election proves to all the court
That present services are paid too short.

DON DIEGO:

Enough. It is a choice you can't abide.
Favor, as well as merit, helped decide.
This much we owe, however, to our king:
Not to dispute his will in anything.
Great honor he confers. Yet, add another:
Let marriage join our houses to each other.
You have a single daughter, I, a son.
If they were wed, our lines would then be one.
Do us this kindness, make my boy your own.

COUNT:

A son so fine must hope to win a throne.
And this new lustre added to your fame
Will make him even vainer of his name.
Perform your office, sir. Become a school:
Show the young prince just what it means to rule.
To make whole kingdoms quake when he comes near;
Fill goodly hearts with love, the bad, with fear.
Add to those virtues the military skills;
Teach him to steel himself against all ills.
In martial pursuits, to let no rival count;
But ride for days, and never once dismount.
To sleep in armor, force breaches in a wall;
And win a battle with no help at all.
Teach him, train him, and show him how to lead:
But illustrate each precept with a deed.

DON DIEGO:

To find these deeds—ignoring envy and strife—
I'll have him read the record of my life.
There, in those legendary confrontations,
He shall acquire the skill to conquer nations;
Bring down a city, rouse his troops to fight;
Be famed the wide world over for his might.

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COUNT:

Present example's best, to give him breeding.
The prince will never learn to rule by reading.
And what, moreover, do all your years display
That I myself don't match in one good day?
If you were valiant once, I am so now—
The bravest sword our kingdom has to show.
Granada and Aragon respect my steel;
My very name's a rampart for Castile.
Were I not here, you'd soon be overthrown;
Your enemies would occupy the throne.
Each day, each instant, extending my renown,
Heaps up my glorious conquests, crown on crown.
The prince, while learning warfare at my side,
Could try his mettle with me on hand to guide.
He'd learn the arts of war by watching me;
And answering to his great quality,
He'd see . . .

DON DIEGO:

I know. You serve your sovereign well.
I've seen you, under my command, excel.
Alas, the years have racked my frame with frost.
The prowess you show now is what I've lost.
In sum, to spare us useless verbiage,
You are today what I was at your age.
Still is it true, in conferring this distinction,
Our sovereign has discerned a fine distinction.

COUNT:

The honor I deserved you took away.

DON DIEGO:

Whoever had it must have earned the pay.

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COUNT:

As I am strongest, I deserve the post.

DON DIEGO:

A man who's been passed over shouldn't boast.

COUNT:

You had your friends intrigue for this at court.

DON DIEGO:

Splendor of deed was all that lent support.

COUNT:

Come now, your age is what he's honoring.

DON DIEGO:

The honor goes to who best suits the king.

COUNT:

If so, it's mine: my courage never swerved.

DON DIEGO:

What was withheld cannot have been deserved.

COUNT:

Not deserve it! Who?

DON DIEGO:

You.

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COUNT:

Your impudence,
Foolhardy old man, shall have its recompense. (*Slaps him.*)

DON DIEGO:

(*Hand on his sword*)
Go on then, kill me! Oh, the insult to my name!
The first of my line who ever blushed with shame!

COUNT:

What can you hope to do, when you're so feeble?

DON DIEGO:

O God! I cannot—stand off! If I were able—

COUNT:

I have your sword. But you would grow too vain
Were this poor trophy wielded by a man.
Adieu. The prince—ignoring envy and strife—
May learn by reading the record of your life.
The right response to insolence of speech
Will be among the best things it can teach.

Scene 4

DON DIEGO:

O deep despair, old age, my enemy!
To live this long and bear such infamy.
Did I grow old, with service unexampled,
To see in just one day my honors trampled?
Right arm, that all in Spain so much admire;
Right arm, that countless times saved this empire;
Time after time held up our king and throne—
Betray me now, as though not still my own?

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O cruel memory of glory past!
Work of a thousand days one day can blast!
Late eminence, on which contentment stumbled,
High precipice from which my honor tumbled!
Must I be forced to applaud the count's new fame
And die still unavenged? Or live in shame?
You, Count, yes, you be governor to the prince:
That post wants honorable men. For since
Your rabid pride paid this affront to me,
I may not serve, despite the king's decree.
And you, most formidable of your time,
Hang but a weight on one weighed down by time.
My sword—who used to strike!—in this offense
You only served to show my incompetence.
Go then, be mine no more, who fell so low.
Pass on to better hands—avenge me now.

Scene 5 (*Don Diego, Don Rodrigo*)

DON DIEGO:

Rodrigo, are you strong?

RODRIGO:

All who desire
May test me here and now.

DON DIEGO:

Courageous fire!
The bold contentiousness, balm to my pain!
I recognize my blood in wrath so fine;
My youth's reborn in this resurgent flame.
Come then, my flesh, my blood, repair my shame.
Come, and avenge me.

RODRIGO:

Of what?

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DON DIEGO:

An affront so low
It deals our sacred honor a mortal blow.
A slap. He should have paid for it in blood
Had age not held me frozen where I stood.
This sword, which I no longer ought to wear,
Must now, my son, be yours alone to bear.
Go then, and let that braggart taste your mettle.
It is an outrage only blood can settle.
Be killed, or kill. But, mind, no vanity.
Few I could send you to are strong as he.
I've seen him, covered over with mud and gore,
Reduce to panic squadrons by the score.
I've watched whole armies crumble beneath his charge.
And, if you wish the truth, I can enlarge
The theme: not only soldier, captain of men,
He is . . .

RODRIGO:

Please, speak.

DON DIEGO:

The father of Chimène.

RODRIGO:

The—

DON DIEGO:

No, do not reply. I know you love her.
But, while disgraced, you are not worthy of her.
A wrong augments with the closeness of the doer.
You know the injury; you have the cure.
Enough. Avenge us both; remove this blame.
Show him that you deserve your father's name.
Crushed by afflictions life has sent my way,
I go to mourn. And you, off! Make him pay!

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Scene 6

RODRIGO:

Pierced to the deepest of my heart
By pangs as swift and unforeseen as they are fatal,
Disconsolate avenger in a just rebuttal,
Unenviable player of a cruel part,
I stand transfixed here, and my soul, the dream that fills me,
Yields to the blow that kills me.
So near to seeing love's true fires exalted—
O, but the deep chagrin!
In this affront, where mine has been assaulted,
The offender is the father of Chimène!

My warmest hopes have come to harm.
Dismissing honor, love takes up another side.
I must avenge a father and renounce a bride.
She burns bright in my heart, and he commands my arm.
Because my grievous choice is to forsake that flame
Or yet to live in shame,
On either side my plight is infinite.
O, but the deep chagrin!
That crude affront, shall I not punish it?
Yet must I kill the father of Chimène?

Father and lady; honor, love:
Delightful tyranny and discipline ingrained.
My happiness must die, or else my honor's stained.
Renounce my joy, or live and be ashamed to love?
This fine and fearsome warrant for a noble spirit—
Yet marked for gallant merit—
And worthy adversary to my bliss:
Blade! O, my deep chagrin!
To win back honor, was I given this?
Given this sword that I should lose Chimène?

Better by far to fight and die.
Beholden to my bride no less than to my name,
I earn with this revenge her anger and her blame;
And yet I earn her scorn if I put vengeance by.

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Thus either I betray the one my dreams prefer,
Or am too base for her.
My illness grows the more I wish it healed,
Redoubling my chagrin.
Come then, my heart; for since I must be killed,
My death, at least, cannot insult Chimène.

Yet, die, and not be justified?
Rush to a grave where hopes for honor all must fail,
And let the whole of Spain elaborate the tale
Of how my poor support brought down my family's pride?
Regard a love whose loyalties my anguished heart
Already sees depart!
I'll heed no more when weakness tries to speak,
Which feeds on my chagrin.
Come then, right arm. Honor is what we seek,
Since after all we cannot keep Chimène.

To this hard truth I would not bow:
My father has a greater claim on me than she.
Whether I die in combat, or from misery,
The blood I had at birth must flow as purely now.
I blame myself already for my indolence.
Off then, to our defence!
And, quite ashamed for having ever halted,
I cast aside chagrin:
For, if today my father's been assaulted,
The offender is the father of Chimène.

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SUSAN KENNEY

Sailing

The Harraseeket Boatyard takes up almost the whole wharf, with its fleet of boats, its lunch and lobster shack, its chandlery and sail loft, the boat brokerage office around the back. The gravelled drive edges over the hill toward the water, but Phil parks the car behind the office and he and Sara walk down to the dock. It's warm for October; even so he wears corduroy pants and a crew neck sweater over a flannel shirt, a down vest over that. He's felt slightly cold ever since he left the hospital, something to do with altered metabolism, the doctors say, or maybe it's just the loss of weight. Skinny people seem to feel the cold more. He's not skinny, at least not yet, but he does get cold.

The air is so warm now it's hard to believe it's no longer midsummer. But all around them as they've driven from yard to yard looking at boats, the trees have been flagged with autumn colors, the leaves so bright they seem to flicker and change before his eyes and he feels pulled along by the pressure of their turning. He has found that if he stares closely enough he can freeze that burning look into a landscape as still and permanent as a painting done on glass. As he stares now across the bay at the surrounding hills and islands, the landscape takes on that flatness, that brittle luminous clarity of detail. He blinks. The sharpness dissolves; the truth is, the foliage is already past its peak. The scarlet maples are mere remnants, the colors have faded, so that far away the land on the horizon lies curled around the water like a rusty chain.

He senses a movement next to him, a stirring of the air. Sara has gone off and is pacing up and down the wharf, hands stuffed in the pockets of her jeans, looking down at the sailboats bobbing in their slips. It's a couple of hours past low tide, but the boats are still a good five feet below the dock. Phil watches her as she comes back toward him, feeling more removed from her than he is in actual distance; this is the

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way it's been ever since he got home from the hospital more than three weeks ago.

He walks down the hall toward the long Chippendale mirror, peering at his reflection, half-expecting it to disappear. The mirror is old and makes him look more blue and fragile than he really is. The truth is, he looks no different now, a little thinner perhaps, but really very much the same. He has lost no weight to speak of, is still strong, but there is a pallor to his complexion, as though someone had powdered his face with chalk and then blown all but a bare residue away. He feels this paleness as a thin layer of ice water just beneath his skin.

He is still examining himself in the mirror when he sees Sara come and stand behind him. As his reflection's eyes catch hers he says casually, lightly, "Now I ask you, do I look like a dying man?"

Sara blinks, goes ghostly pale herself. Before she turns away she says quite calmly, her voice as precise and level as the glass, "No, as a matter of fact you don't." But he is sorry that he asked.

Sara walks down onto the dock and stands next to him, looking at him with an air of expectancy, as if to say "Now what?" This is the third time they've been to this particular boatyard in the past week, because Phil has seen a boat here that he likes more than any of the others they have looked at this fall. It's a nineteen-foot fiberglass sloop, only slightly used, with wood trim, new sails, and a spinnaker. Phil likes the extravagance of the spinnaker, even though he's never used one. The boat is sitting in the water below them right now; it's one of the boatyard's rental fleet. Phil can see it tugging at its mooring lines, moving up and down with the swell.

"What do you want to do?" Sara asks.

Phil shrugs. "I thought we could just walk around, look at the boats, talk to the broker, do what we always do . . . "

Sara turns away. After a moment she says over her shoulder, "I don't see why you want to keep looking at boats all the time if you think we can't buy one."

For an instant Sara reminds him of the boat, tugging at the

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lines, impatient to get on with it. Phil feels no need to get on with anything; he is perfectly content to stay as he is. "I like to look at boats," he answers. "I love boats. Besides, it's not so much the boats themselves as the idea of boats. You know that."

Sara shakes her head slightly, but she does know, Phil is certain of that. After all, she is the sailor. It was her tales of sailing in her youth—Comets, Lightnings, Bantams, Stars, white flags rampant across a field of blue—that had gotten him started on this so late in life in the first place. He hadn't learned to sail until after his operation two years ago, at Sara's suggestion, in a boat borrowed from a friend. It had come upon him as something of a revelation, and his only regret was that he had waited until he was thirty-five years old even to try. They had been looking for a boat of their own before he got sick again, and they are still looking, more as a way to pass the time than anything else. It is not so much the boat itself, or even sailing as the idea of it. There is something so complex yet pure about the relation of wind and sail, so absorbing about the need to balance conflicting forces, that he finds sailing is all he thinks about, or tries to, and it is more than just a way to pass the time. Who had ever thought to harness the wind with little more than a bedsheet, two sticks, and twenty yards of rope? His sailing manuals have little to say about this, other than that it was inevitable that the earliest seafarers should find a way to use the free power of the wind. That seems obvious enough. But who were those early seafarers? Aborigines? Indians? Phil imagines a birchbark canoe, a buffalo skin hoisted on a spear, a lone Indian with feathers in his hair being blown before the wind down Gitchee-Gumee. But he knows he is wrong; it was not the Indians but the grave Tyrians—Phoenicians—who were the first, or so the story goes. Still, as he looks out across the water he sees the sailboats making a temporary encampment in light air, their sails like wigwams against the ragged trees.

"Besides," he says by way of conversation, "it's too late in the season to buy a sailboat. We'd never use it."

There is a slight pause. Finally Sara says, "We could buy it for next year."

This is the sticking point, of course; everything always

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comes back to this, the question of next year. Phil says nothing, hoping she will drop it, sorry he even brought it up. But she goes on.

"We've spent all this time looking, and we know what we want, so why don't we just buy it? We've got the money." She gestures at the boat below them, the Loon. All the rental boats have names, the Eagle, the Tern, the Teal, the Loon, the Old Squaw. Phil glances down at the Loon. He likes it well enough, but he'd just as soon go right on looking. Sara, on the other hand, is certain it's the boat for them. She likes to have things settled, nothing left up in the air. Phil is sympathetic to her need for certainty, her impatience; he just doesn't share it.

"That way we'll have it," she persists. "We won't have to waste time looking next spring. We can start right in at the beginning of the season."

Phil sighs. It is clear she is not going to drop it. He does not want to be cruel, but there are times when he wishes she would get over these dogged forays into the future. They make him uncomfortable. "I may not be here next spring," he says. He hears her quick intake of breath.

"Don't say that."

"Why not? You know it's true."

"You don't know that. Nobody knows that."

"It doesn't really matter," Phil says. "I just don't think it's worth the risk. What are you going to do with it if I'm not here?"

"Sail it myself," she says sharply and walks away. Behind him he can hear the gravel crunching, but he does not turn to see where she is going. He steps to the edge of the dock and looks down, sees far below a shadow of himself only a little darker than the murky, oil-slicked water, undulating strangely with the moving tide.

When Sara returns to the dock she has Wally Perkins, the yacht broker, in tow. "Hi. How's things? Your wife says you two might be interested in going sailing. The Loon's free, if you want to take her out. We're pulling all the boats out first of the week, so now's your chance. No charge. I'll even throw in a motor free."

Phil hesitates, looks from one to the other. He hasn't thought about actually going sailing, it's so late in the season.

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"How long have you got?"

Phil blinks, stares at him.

"About four hours," Sara answers quickly. "Until the kids get home from school."

"Oh that's plenty of time," Wally says. "You can get a real feel for a boat in an hour or two. No problem."

Sara and Wally Perkins stand on either side of him, waiting for him to decide. He looks at Sara. This is her idea. Still, he understands it as a gesture, an alternative to looking that isn't buying, in fact a compromise. It's a nice day, the air is warm, and they have lots of time. He smiles to himself, then nods.

"Sure, why not?" he says. "What have we got to lose?"

Lying in his hospital bed, he cannot see all the way down the corridor, but Sara can. He sees her stiffen. "Here he comes," she says quietly, her fork resting in the macaroni and cheese she is supposed to be eating for lunch. Phil lies back against the pillows, a layer of ice water spreading under his skin. The arteriogram was done on Wednesday; it's past noon on Thursday now and still they haven't heard. He has told Sara that this means bad news; good news travels fast in a hospital and no news is bad news, but Sara, meliorist as always, has insisted that the doctor is very busy, that they finished the test late, that it is all very complicated, that it doesn't mean a thing; at worst it means a puzzle. But Phil knows what it means. He watches Sara lift her fork to her mouth, glad that she is eating. He has not felt much like eating himself. First it was all the tests, and now the hospital food seems to turn his stomach. Maybe he's just gotten out of the habit of eating. When he gets home, Sara says, she will feed him up.

Now he can see the doctor coming toward his room. He certainly looks grim enough, Phil thinks, his brow furrowed, his mouth drawn up in a tight pucker of what could be either disgust or resignation. He's as pale as Phil feels. His hands are behind his back as he walks along, but as he comes through the door he brings them forward, holding Phil's chart in one hand. He pulls up a chair, sits down, flips open the chart, and studies it. Oh, hell, Phil thinks. He doesn't know a thing. The doctor looks up, nods at Sara, then fixes his eyes on Phil.

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"Hi, Phil. How're you feeling?"

"Fine." It's a lie, of course; he has a headache, his nose is stuffed up, and his stomach is bothering him. But one of the rituals of hospital behavior is that you don't complain.

"Good," the doctor says, and looks back down at the chart, flipping over pages again. Phil glances at Sara, who is chewing macaroni and cheese in slow motion, as though she's forgotten what she's doing. Her eyes are riveted on the chart, and Phil knows that she is busy trying to read it upside down, an old trick of hers. But the doctor is flipping the pages over too fast, not even looking at them himself. He knows what's there. Finally Sara swallows, and pushes the fork around in the small casserole, but does not take another mouthful.

"Hey, Sam," she says. "How come you always show up at lunchtime?"

Sam's face creases into a smile; for a moment he looks like an amiable troll. "Is it any good?" he asks, peering over at Sara's dish.

"I couldn't tell you," Sara says, and puts her fork down. She waits, watching Sam's face, sitting on the end of Phil's bed with her hands folded in her lap, looking, Phil thinks in admiration, perfectly composed.

"Well," Sam says, and shuffles the chart once more. Then he shuts the hinged cover with a snap, crosses his legs, folds his hands casually, and stares out the window. He takes a deep breath. Here we go, thinks Phil. "The arteriogram demonstrates conclusively a large mass, presumably tumor, in the right retroperitoneal space, surrounding the kidney. The reason I'm late," he inclines his head at Sara, "is that I've been on the phone to Lahey, the head kidney man at Mass General. We talked quite a long time about you, Phil." Sam darts a look at Phil, clears his throat, and sits in silence.

Phil lies back against the pillows, feeling suddenly exhausted. His mouth is dry and he is short of breath. Side effects of the drugs, he thinks, looking up at the ceiling. He concentrates on slowing down his breathing, the pounding of his heart.

"And?" Sara asks.

Sam shifts in the chair. "His conclusion is that whatever can be done can be done here."

Phil feels relieved. He won't have to leave home, go to another hospital for more tests, not see Sara and the kids every

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day. Maybe he can go home soon, spend some time outside while the weather is still nice, see if he can borrow the Klines' boat again, and do a little sailing. Maybe he can even go back to work.

"What's that?" Sara asks. "What can be done here?"

Sam clears his throat again; he must have a cold too, Phil thinks, poor bastard.

"That's what I want to discuss with you. The options." He glances at Phil. "You've taken medical leave, haven't you?" Phil shakes his head. "AWOL, huh? Well, you better do that. The college will just have to do without you for a while." Phil nods, resigned. He hadn't wanted to stop work in the first place, but things got out of hand, and now he's stuck with it. Still it's probably better to step out early in the semester, before they all get too used to having him around.

"Then what?" Sara asks. "More surgery?"

Oh my God, Phil thinks. Not another operation; the last one damn near killed me. I'm not doing that again. He shuts his eyes tight, wishing he were somewhere else. Sam's and Sara's voices echo, then grow smaller, as if they were leaving the room, but when he opens his eyes a slit he can see that they are still sitting right where they were.

"It's clearly inoperable," Sam says. "That means . . ."

"Why?" Sara interrupts him. "Why can't you operate?"

Sam shuts his eyes, then opens them. "The mass is too large, and spread all over the retroperitoneum," he says, as if this were perfectly self-evident.

But Sara doesn't give up. "Didn't you say it was on the right side?"

"Right, left, left, right," Sam says crossly. "What difference does it make? It's all over him." Phil opens his eyes wide, sees Sam wave his hand dismissively at Sara, as though she were a pesky insect. He's getting impatient, wants to get this whole thing over with. Phil thinks how much alike Sam and Sara are, a matched pair of bulldogs on either end of a rag. Sara wants to know everything and she wants to know it now. Sam wants to get out of here. Sara, inexplicably, is stuffing forkfuls of macaroni in her mouth, chewing and swallowing. The thought makes him sick; he can't believe she's still eating. Then he is overtaken by an awful thought; he sits up and leans forward on one elbow, addressing Sam.

"Not chemotherapy?"

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Sam glances at him, startled. His eyelids flutter closed and he dips his head, but Phil can't tell whether the movement means agreement or dissent.

"Chemotherapy and radiation have been demonstrated to have no effect on this kind of tumor," Sam says.

Phil lies back, once again relieved. No chemo, no radiation, no operation. No getting sick, no losing his hair. David and Linnie will not have to watch his retching, vomiting, getting bald. But Sara's voice breaks in on his relief.

"What kind of tumor? Couldn't it be something else?"

Phil can't understand why she is so persistent. What more is there to know? His mind is swaddled in a kind of pleasant fog, his grandmother's crazy quilt stuffed into all the nooks and crannies that were echoing so strangely a few minutes ago. He feels sleepy. He wishes Sam would leave, that Sara would let him go.

Sam's voice drones on. "Same as before. Renal cell carcinoma. Metastatic kidney cancer. It's not good, Sara." His patience is elaborate now, his politeness palpable. Phil can feel it stretched thin, twanging in the air.

"That's not what Sloan-Kettering said."

Sam rolls his eyes to the ceiling. "It's the diagnosis of record," he says.

"They said it was some sort of ganglioma. Not renal cell," Sara says doggedly. Phil can hear the desperation edging into her voice. That was over two years ago, that other opinion. Still, he's got to hand it to her, remembering all that stuff, keeping it in her head all this time. He feels sorry for her, left holding the bag like this. He feels as though he has behaved badly, let everybody down. He squeezes his eyes shut briefly, then opens them. No sense crying now.

"It doesn't matter," Sam says curtly, standing up. "It's all the same, six of one and half-a-dozen of the other." He tucks Phil's chart under his arm. "Any more questions?" He looks at Phil, carefully avoiding Sara.

"Yes, I've got a question," Sara says clearly. "If it's not surgery, and it's not radiation or chemotherapy, then just what the hell is it that can be done here?"

Sam pauses in the doorway, his face inscrutable. There is a long silence. Then he looks directly at Phil.

"If it were me, I would do nothing," he says, turns abruptly and walks away.

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They both stare after him for a moment, then Sara flings down her fork and jumps up, runs out the door and down the hall. It isn't until she returns a second later, saying through the doorway, "I'll be right back, I've got to talk to Sam," that he realizes he has assumed she'd finally run away.

The sailboat's wake leaves a corridor of calm behind them as the wind pulls them forward. Not a lot of wind, just enough. Phil leans back against the combing, elbows resting on the deck, watching Sara at the helm. He smiles at her. "How does it feel?" he asks.

"Fine," she answers, stooping slightly to peer under the boom, checking the set of the jib. The near feather is fluttering wildly. Phil pulls the jib sheet in. The feathers flutter, then lie flat against the sail as though they had been pasted on. "It's a great day for sailing. Who wants to look at boats when you can sail one?" She pulls the main sheet in slightly so that both sails are close-hauled, their curves parallel. The boat heels over slightly. Phil moves to windward, sits next to her. They sit for a while, not talking. Phil's arm lies along the combing, just touching her back, so that she can lean against it if she wants, the way the sail leans against the air behind it.

He looks up to where the mast prods the sky in small half-circles. The sky goes on forever, uniform, clear, vast. Far up, very small, a red kite flutters and swings against the air, scooting back and forth, captive on its string. No, too far out, Phil thinks; it must be loose, blowing out to sea. As he watches, it loses the wind, begins to fall, slowly drifting down a zigzag path. Phil stares up at it, mesmerized by the precision and predictability of its movement, the balance of conflicting forces. Back and forth, back and forth, a fast swoop, then slow recovery, friction overcoming gravity, each time a little lower down. He feels himself drawn up, and for a moment he is riding the kite, high above, looking at himself and Sara in the sailboat. He sees the white triangle from above, as bright and angular as a gull's wing. But he is also in the boat, watching the kite's red diamond swoop closer, falling toward them, bringing him with it. He nudges Sara. "Look," he says. "A lost kite."

Sara glances upward. "That's not a kite," she says casually. "That's a red maple leaf."

With an odd jerk, Phil's sense of size and distance con-

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tracts. It is indeed a leaf. Phil watches it flutter past, fall into the water and float there. The scalded, curled-up edges catch the wind, and the leaf skims away. The wind is coming up. Phil can see it on the water, roughened patches of darker blue, scattered here and there, moving closer. "Look out," he says, "here comes a puff."

Sara pushes the tiller away slightly, pulls up on the main sheet, heads up into the wind. But it's too late; the boat leans, then heels sharply as wind gusts into the sails. Like a giant hand the wind presses the sails down toward the water, then just as abruptly lets them up. The boat rocks wildly. Water rushes in and foams along the combing. Suddenly the floor is perpendicular, and they are standing nearly upright, their feet on the centerboard trunk. A second wave smashes over the deck. Sara hangs onto the tiller for a moment longer, then says, "Here, you take it," as she turns and claws her way onto the deck, throwing her weight out over the rail to bring the boat back down.

Phil grabs the flailing tiller. The boat is wallowing, the sails banging and snapping. He takes the main sheet from Sara, eases off slightly, lets the main out, then holds the tack, studying the telltales, adjusting and correcting until once more the feathers lie flat against the sail. The boat heels over smoothly, not too far, and runs through the waves. The water foams and hisses as the boat pushes it aside.

"I couldn't hold it," Sara says from the deck above him.

"That's all right," Phil says absently, already caught up in the business of sailing. He looks backward over his shoulder and without turning his head adjusts the tiller so they are on a beam reach. The boat seems to lift up and leap ahead. "That's it," he says. "That's perfect."

He's talking to Spencer, the head man at Boston Institute for Cancer Research and Treatment. Sara is hovering somewhere in the background. It was her idea to call, to try and find out what's taking so long. It's been almost three weeks since Phil got out of the local hospital, more than that since all his records were sent down. There are some things he would rather not know right now, but Sara is insistent, believing they should know whatever there is to know, even if it's nothing.

"Ah, yes. Mr. . . . Ah. Why yes. What can I do for you?"

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He's very courteous, with a small, neat finicky voice. Phil wonders what he looks like in real life, if he is a small, neat, finicky person.

"I called to see if you knew anything yet." Already he feels at a disadvantage. The Institute gets hundreds of referrals every month; probably Spencer doesn't even know who he is. He hears the sound of papers being shuffled on the other end.

"Ah yes. Here we are. Well, as a matter of fact, things are getting on quite nicely. We've sent your slides all over the city. Interesting case." Phil imagines a fleet of taxicabs with his slides and X rays riding in the back seat crisscrossing the streets of Boston. "We've got a pretty good idea," Spencer goes on, "but we're still waiting for a definitive answer. One more country to be heard from."

Oh, Christ, another country? Phil thinks, then he realizes Spencer is speaking metaphorically. At least he hopes he is. Anyway, as far as Phil's concerned it's all in another country. He feels strangely breathless. Sara is standing at his side, looking anxious.

"Ask him," she urges. "Ask him."

"Do you have any better idea what it might be?"

"Well. We have to use special dyes, a very complicated procedure, but yes, most of the reports have come back. Let me see. Some kind of paraganglioma. Yes, here it is. Probably paraganglioma or pheochromocytoma. It's quite rare. A difficult diagnosis."

"Para-ganglioma," Phil repeats. The word means nothing to him. He can't even pronounce the other one.

"Not renal cell?" Sara says, grabbing on to his arm. "Ask him to spell it." He doesn't understand why she gets so excited. They are only words.

"Not renal cell carcinoma?" he repeats to Spencer.

"No, oh no. Who told you that?"

"It's something different," he says to Sara.

"I beg your pardon?" Spencer's polite voice says faintly over the line. Sara has turned away. Phil cannot see her face.

"I'm sorry. I was talking to my wife. We were told up here that it was renal cell carcinoma."

"Oh, I see. No, it looks like paraganglioma all right." There is a silence; the phone hums. "Did you have any other questions?" Spencer asks finally.

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"Ask him what they're planning to do," Sara says.

"What's going to be done? I mean, can you give us an idea of what's going to happen next, when they're . . . you're . . . "

"Yes, well." The voice seems to shrink and fade inside the telephone. "I think we'd better get you down here for a consultation, anyway. Possibly, no, make it probably an operation, but we can't tell at this point. We'll need more tests. But we'll definitely want to see you. And your wife, of course."

"How long," Sara says. "Find out how long."

"When?"

"Ah well. I think we might as well wait until the last report is in." He sounds so tentative, Phil wonders briefly if he is being evasive. But then the voice comes on much louder. Maybe it's the connection. "Quite probably right after the weekend," Spencer says. "As soon as we get a free bed. Then we'll want to get more pictures of that left side . . . "

"Left?" Phil asks. "Why the left?"

There is a puzzled silence. "That's where the tumor is." Pause. "Isn't it?"

Phil holds the phone away from his ear, stares at it. Sara comes back and stands close to him.

"I thought it was on the right," Phil says finally. "That's what they told us up here."

"Oh, well, that could be. But we'll find out," Spencer says cheerfully. "Don't worry, we'll get it sorted out. You'll be hearing from us. Goodbye now." He breaks the connection, leaving Phil holding the empty phone.

He turns to Sara, shaking his head.

"I give up," he says.

Sailing is not so much a science as an art, and thus demands complete attention, Phil thinks, turning his head now toward the mainsail to check the luff, now toward the water to look for cat's-paws, feeling the steady pressure of the tiller under his hand. There are so many variables, wind strength and direction, tide changes, rocks and shoals, so much to watch for. And then there are matters of discretion, whether to sail closer to the wind to gain distance at the expense of speed, or to lay off to gain the fastest point of sail. In sailing you don't always get exactly where you meant to go. It is a question of balancing forces that are constantly changing, possibilities that continually transmute. Still there is that mo-

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ment always hoped for, when everything conjoins and the boat leaps forward, creating its own wind, apparent wind exceeding true wind, drawing the boat onward. Looking at his own tautened sail, he wonders who ever imagined that wind blowing sideways into a sail would make a boat go forward, that the fastest point of sail is a beam reach, the wind at your back blowing over the rail, the sails almost perpendicular to the direction of the wind.

"Aren't you hungry?" Sara asks, breaking into his concentration. He looks at his watch. They have been sailing for almost three hours. It's long past lunchtime, but Phil shakes his head, twitches the mainsheet, adjusts the tiller. He's not thinking about lunch. The boat's speed increases almost imperceptibly. Ah good, he thinks. He pulls the sail in more; they are sailing close-hauled, to gain distance to windward. But not at the expense of speed.

"We should start thinking about getting back," Sara says after a while. "Even if we're not hungry, before you know it the kids will be getting home from school."

Phil nods absently, watching the configuration of the sail, the arrow line of telltale pointing out the wind direction. "I could stay out here forever," he says without thinking.

Without even looking at her he can feel her stiffen, feels it almost as a change in wind direction, her sense of outrage at the lack of forever, or even next year. He wishes he had said something else.

"Be that as it may," Sara says calmly, "I think we should be getting back while there's still wind. Who wants to chug all the way in with that disgusting thing?" she finishes, gesturing at the skeletal little engine hanging off the transom. Phil has forgotten it existed, but there it is, their insurance against the failure of the wind. No, they would not want to go back that way, with all the noise and smell and commotion.

"All right," he says, and pushes the tiller across the combing. The boat begins to swing around, then stalls, its sail flapping aimlessly, as limp and fragile as a closed eyelid. The water has lost its ruffled quality, and between them and the shore, the surface lies as flat and slippery-looking as a pool of oil. The boat coasts for a few feet, then settles back into the water like a roosting bird. The wind has simply blown itself away.

"Well, how do you like that?" Phil says, leaning back against

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the deck. The tiller nudges his hand, and he slaps it away. "Wouldn't you know? You can't trust anybody." He looks toward shore; they must be at least three miles out. He can't even make out the boatyard from here. "Isn't this just our luck?" He hasn't meant to sound so resentful, but the annoyance wells up from some place deep inside and surprises even him. He stares around at the surface of the water, looking for any sign of wind.

There is a silence. Then Sara says, "Do you want to talk about it now?"

"Shhh," Phil mouths, shaking his head and waving her to silence. Not twenty feet away a black faucet has appeared above the surface of the water. Sara is bewildered; he puts a hand on her head and directs her gaze. The faucet swivels, flashes a startled red eye at them, then with a quick looping dive shoots away under the water, a dark torpedo speeding out of range. Birdmarines, his son has called them. Often only their heads and necks show, turning silently, intelligently, like periscopes, precise, mechanical.

"I didn't know they came out this far," Sara whispers, her head swivelling in an odd imitation of the bird. "Where is it?" Silently they watch the smooth surface for the loon's reappearance. Phil is grateful for the distraction. The sails hang loosely, the boom sways back and forth in the slight swell, and the only sound is the clink of halyards swinging against the mast. Phil misses the sound of the wind; the air seems empty now.

The loon does not reappear. Sara stands up, her hand shielding her eyes, and looks all around. "Do you suppose we frightened it?" she asks, her attention focussed on the loon, or lack of it. Phil can't take his eyes off her now; he stares at her, seeing her anxious for once about something else but him, the intensity of her concern. He knows that she is willing the loon to reappear, drawing it toward the surface with her vigil. Then he realizes that he is holding his breath, watching her. Carefully he lets it out, not wanting to startle her. He jumps as he hears overhead the sudden raucous cheer of seagulls, sees them flung across the sky like so many bits of torn-up paper. They wheel and turn, jeering, squabbling. He wonders if the loon can hear them. A few white feathers float down, settle on the water and seem to stick motionless in a pool of tar. The silence lengthens, and Sara does not move.

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"Don't worry," he says at last. "They can stay down as long as fifteen minutes."

She turns and looks at him, bemused. "How do you know that?"

Phil shrugs. "I read it in an article. Loons are an endangered species."

"Well, this one isn't," Sara says, pointing behind him. Far away the black crescent head sticks up above the surface, flicks around, spots them, and quickly sinks out of sight again. Another disembodied head appears, or is it the same one? No, there are two; Phil has read that they come in twos, and usually mate for life. For several minutes he and Sara watch the loons work their way in and out under the still water, relieved of the necessity to talk. They just sit, listening to the halyards clank like cowbells. The water is as still as glass. Phil looks up into the shrouds, sees the telltales hanging limp and motionless. He reads this as defeat, and reaches for the handle of the motor, stands up and braces himself to pull.

"Phil, wait." Sara's voice startles him. "Can't we talk a minute before you start that thing?" Even without looking he knows she is regarding him across the cockpit; he feels like a skewered butterfly. He knows what she is leading up to, and he feels the resistance stiffening, pressing upward. She wants to talk, but what good does talking do? What is there to say? He turns, stares past her to study the meager motion of the telltale on the shroud. The little bit of thread twitches, then falls limp again. There is no hope of wind. There is no escape, though talking is the last thing he wants to do.

"Phil, we've got to talk sometime. You may be leaving in three days." Her voice goes on, relentless, to its real point. "If we bought the boat then we wouldn't have to keep borrowing. You could sail it any time you wanted and not worry. And we would have it . . ." She does not say the words "next year"; she will not make that mistake again. "It'll give you something to think about when you're down in Boston. Something to look forward to."

Phil finally looks at her; he knows she feels his silence as a rebuke. She looks so pretty, sitting there with her cheeks reddened by the wind, her hair all blown around in wisps, a fuzzy halo around her face, her hands clasped in her lap. She is staring at him earnestly, intently, and suddenly he recalls all the stories she has told him about her father sailing in a

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borrowed boat those summers on the lake where she grew up, her father gay and smiling in the pictures, dead long before Phil met her. He realizes in this instant that if they buy this boat Sara will have recreated nearly all the elements of her childhood and early youth. He knows that this is not her motive, that she is not even aware of it, but he feels this knowledge as his own guilt, thinking of her father dead so young, the loss he knows she still feels so acutely, and accepts the knowledge, standing helpless in the rocking boat, that this is the worst thing he could have done to her, this dying of his own.

"I don't want to talk," he says as gently as he can. "I just want to sail."

"I know that," she says, and starts to cry.

He starts to reach out for her, but hesitates; there is really nothing he can do for her, not now. Instead he reaches for the starter handle. If they can't sail they can still get back, for the children. He cocks his shoulder, is about to yank when he feels Sara's hand on his arm. He turns, and she points wordlessly to the horizon. He hears, inside the silence, a regular lapping noise, gurgling, percolating as though the boat were moving. Little ripples appear along the surface of the water. But when he glances quickly at the shrouds the thread is limp.

"The tide is turning," Sara says. "That means there'll be wind."

"Oh, sure," Phil snorts. "Wind from where?" He waves her off and leans toward the engine. "That's an old salt's tale."

"It's true," Sara insists. "Something about the movement of great masses of water all at once. Stirs up the air. The wind dies down, then comes back from the opposite direction. I read it in one of your books." She sticks a wet finger up, sitting there almost primly, like a schoolteacher making one last point to an unruly class. "You just wait. We'll be able to run all the way back."

"So now you can predict the future," Phil says, smiling at her prim certainty.

"You bet," she says.

Sure enough, standing upright in the cockpit, Phil feels a slight wind grope across his face, pluck at his hair. He squints across the water, sees far off tiny ripples starting as the wind frays the water into little ravelled skeins of white. The sea re-

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sembles a worn and crumpled garment someone has spread out and tried to smooth. As he watches, it buckles, flaps, then foams, changing color as a line of darker blue flies toward them.

"Here it comes!" Phil barely has time to shout, as he sits down and grabs for the tiller and the mainsheet. Suddenly the wind is all around them, waves splashing against the hull, shooting up like whitewater. Further away, the surface breaks as though it were flowing over a series of obstructions, but there are no rocks or shoals out here; it is the wind driving the water back against the tide. The wind whips the waves to whitecaps, and blows their tops to smithereens. Phil heads the boat around, and the wind knocks them forward, swings the main far out to one side. The jib flails back and forth around the forestay. Sara grabs the whisker pole and hops up on deck to set the jib for wing and wing. Now they are sailing, and there is no more time to talk.

There is something so complex yet pure about the relation of wind and sail, Phil thinks, as he stands on the dock watching the yardman strip down the Loon and tie it to. Sara is standing next to him, and he can tell that she is not watching the boats. He hears a motor start up and looks out through the multitude of bobbing masts to where one is moving, a sailboat gliding through the channel in the chop, its sails fluttering. Someone starting out even this late in the day. Phil wishes he were with him. But it is almost time to start for home. He feels rather than sees Sara contemplating him. She reaches up and puts a hand against his cheek. It feels like a patch of sunlight warm across his skin.

"You look wonderful, you know. Your color's better, not so chalky. This is good for you," she says.

All around him the yellow birch leaves turn to the hardness of brass and rattle in the wind. He looks at Sara, silhouetted against the leaves, her yellow windbreaker the same color, her face ruddy and hopeful from the sun and wind, the long day's sail. It is a matter of balancing conflicting forces. He looks all around him, at the trees, the masts, the sea, the sky, pale and fathomless overhead. The wind blows, the landscape moves, but it does not stare back. Hard, indifferent, the leaves of brass, of copper, of bronze, the sky a vast unbroken mirror, the water shards of broken glass glittering in the sun,

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have nothing more to say to him, nothing at all. He feels this silence hardening inside him. Sailing close-hauled means gaining distance, sometimes at the expense of speed. Even in sailing, you can't always get exactly where you want to go.

"I wish that I had died during that first operation," he says. "Then you would be used to it by now."

Sara stares at him for an instant, then turns and runs, the wind behind her spinning hard discs of leaves across her path. He watches as she runs down the dock, across the wharf, up the little gravelled drive and out of sight, going nowhere, anywhere, Phil thinks, as long as it's away.

When she comes back, he is still standing on the dock, staring out across the bay. Sara stands close to him, slides her hand between his arm and side. He doesn't speak, doesn't look at her. After a while she withdraws her arm, and they stand side by side, not touching, staring at the water. The wind is gentler now, the waves no longer frayed with white.

"I bought the boat," Sara says finally.

Phil nods. It is not sailing so much as the idea of sailing, not boats, but the idea of boats. He looks at Sara curiously, as if from far away. He wonders if she has acted out of knowledge, faith, or sheer bravado. He wonders what, if anything, she knows, and how she knows it. But then it hardly matters; she has already said that she will sail it herself. Life will go on without him after all.

Across the bay the sunlight falls obliquely on the water, turning the ripples into tiny bright dagger points of light, and for a moment, as he watches, each one becomes a minute triangle of sail, dashing one after another, hundreds of sails dancing, scooting, rushing persistently across his line of sight. But then his vision clears, and once again he sees only ripples touched with light. Far down the bay another triangle of sail, real this time, heads up into the wind, shivers momentarily, then tightens to a plume. Standing there, Phil sees his whole life compassed in this passage of one feathered sail across a sea of jagged glass.

"You can always sail it yourself," he says.

"You'll be here," Sara answers.

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WILLIAM STAFFORD

For People with Problems About How To Believe

1.

Say it's early morning, coming awake—
after a while you begin to believe. At first,
barely light, only a surmise, only a guess:
even birds doubt, but they talk to each
other. One takes the plunge and says yes.
But not quite yet—the doubters wait: gray
everywhere, nothing else, just between times.
You relax. But it gets harder to doubt.
At exactly the time when you really believe
a redhot little arc silently slits the whole
horizon and the sun comes irresistibly into the world
and is.

2.

Or maybe this works:
you sing a little, wait—
hear that far song
coming back at you? Is it only
your ears not wanting to
be alone? They wander
deep silence and come up
with sounds made out of
need, the way puppies
learn friends—everybody
at once, wiggling to say
love is everything.

3.

Or, on the way to Alaska you can feel those leafy
quietudes, long invitations to states
that haven't even been found. Your soul begins
to brim the horizon, ready to escape

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and never come back. Later you tell people
and they won't believe you—they want the facts.
But some facts happen only to people who are ready
for how the Yukon turns over when you say its name.

4.

Sometime you are walking: you begin
to know—even those things out of sight or hearing,
stones in the ground, flocks of birds
beyond the horizon. A little bit of snow
forms in the sky: you feel it furring
out there, ready; then it comes down.
A quality of attention has been given to you:
when you turn your head the whole world
leans forward. It waits there thirsting
after its names, and you speak it all out as it
comes to you; you go forward into forest leaves
holding out your hands, trusting all encounters,
telling every mile, "Take me home."

Little Rooms

I rock high in the oak—secure, big branches—
at home while darkness comes. It gets lonely up here
as lights needle forth below, through airy space.
Tinkling dish-washing noises drift up, and a faint
smooth gush of air through leaves, cool evening
moving out over the earth. Our town leans farther
away, and I ride through the arch toward midnight,
holding on, listening, hearing deep roots grow.

There are rooms in a life, apart from others, rich
with whatever happens—a glimpse of moon, a breeze.
You who come years from now to this brief spell
of nothing that was mine: the open, slow passing
of time was a gift going by. I have put my hand out
on the mane of the wind, like this, to give it to you.

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School Play

You were a princess, lost; I
was a little bird. Nobody cared
where we went or how we sang.
A storm, I seem to remember, a giant
wave, some kind of crash at the end.
I think we cried when they took off our wings.

If time should happen again—and it could:
we're still in a play, you know—maybe
we'll hide so well the wave will pass
and after the storm we'll come out. We both
will really believe what, even then, I knew:
not the princess, not the bird—but the song—was true.

Deciding

One mine the Indians worked had
gold so good they left it there
for God to keep.

At night sometimes you think
your way that far, that deep,
or almost.

You hold all things or not depending
not on greed but whether they suit what
life begins to mean.

Like those workers you study what moves,
what stays. You bow, and then, like them,
you know—

What's God, what's world, what's gold.

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Getting Scared

Tending our fire in the oil drum, we felt
that second earthquake begin. Near dawn it was,
when everything stills. To be safe, we had
slept in a field. We felt a long slow wave
in the earth. It wasn't the stars that moved, but ourselves,
in time to a dance the dead could feel. Our fire
stirred where it cooled. Sparks whirled up.

Crawling along by a breath at a time, we tried to
get low; we tried to sight across level earth
near dawn and let the time tell us about how
to be alive in the grass, the miles, the strangeness,
with only the sun looking back from the other end of light.
We moved out as far as we could. "Forever," we thought,
"if we breathe too hard it will all be gone."

We spread our arms out wide on the ground
and held still. We set out for that cave we knew
above a stream, where early sunlight reaches
far back, willows all around, and clams in the river
for the taking. And we prayed for that steady event
we had loved so long without knowing it, our greatest
possession—the world when it didn't move.

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A Writer's Fountain Pen Talking

I gave out one day and left a woman
tied to a railroad track.

And what happened next?
The train couldn't go on; it stopped with a
foot in the air, like Napoleon's horse on the bridge
when it knew the plank was gone.

What ever happened?
When they filled the pen again—this was years later—
the train backed up, and an old woman
climbed on: she had waited all that time
to be rescued, or killed. She felt cheated,
for that strange diversion.

Where is she now?
Right here on this page, hiding in the ink you see.

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ERIC TORGERSEN

Poem for Adrienne Rich

But where were those women going?
to the top of the mountain and down again.

On the mountain they died;
your poem says they go on together forever.

When you write *there are words*
I cannot choose again, could that mean

there is no going back? It has meant
in that country *let the purges begin.*

*

Seven years since the first time I saw you:
I wondered, later, if I'd only dreamed the halt

in your gait, as if it could not
have been real in one so vivid. Tonight

you spoke, as always, with clarity,
authority; something in your fine

clear angry voice I can never deny.
But you've cut off your hair

and grown old again after years
in which each new picture we saw

insisted that you had grown younger;
tonight you were terrible.

If I tried to say yes
tonight your fierce cold wrinkling

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eyes would look through me
until I could not believe

any more that my own mother loves me.
What could I deny?

Aging and small when the reading
had ended you limped past me into the night

of a city in which I'm afraid
you were almost alone.

*

What could it mean, in a world
where there is going back, where going back *is*—

this dream we can reach the top
of a mountain and keep on going?

The one dream that always returns:
an end to returning.

A road past the peak
would lead somewhere beyond guilt?

Where's the throat
this voice comes from that calls us to choose

to die on that mountain refusing return
to a city where everyone is guilty?

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Going and Staying

I wouldn't go with you today,
swimming,
I chose to stay here

and to tell the truth someone
I hardly know
looked too good to me this morning;

but that it's good to be living
with you and have plans
is as true

and more useful;
the small
energy she raised

is liquid and convertible;
someone said
of the soul at death

it has no need to *go* anywhere;
staying at home
in a chosen life working

what energy I find
into poems
is my deepest day-dream;

love for you,
for poetry, the good
rich poems of John Logan,

Stroh's beer,
a little of which stays with me
though I piss it away;

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this is my running,
my laps
in the pool, ten miles

on the ten-speed;
I'm feeling exalted, only
a little drunk, thinking

of you with no need
for my thoughts to go anywhere;
in earnest, in our own

good time we'll go places together;
the one need to leave
each other for long

is death, the need
not to *be* anywhere,
to pull up the plastic

sheet on the Magic Slate,
to shake the Etch-a-Sketch;
what if that need

comes to me right on schedule,
long before
it's scheduled to come for you?

it's time
to come clean, these are wedding
thoughts in a wedding

poem, death
is the need for a wedding:
young moderns who refuse

to die all want divorces,
their "freedom," not to have
to have children;

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one girl wrote
to *Rolling Stone* she was saving
that energy for hiking at sixty,

at seventy, at eighty;
energy saved
in that bank gets lost in the crash

though we ride our bikes
at ninety,
ninety-one, ninety-two;

for now here's a ten-
mile poem, here's twenty laps,
not from need

to go but from pleasure
in going, being able,
from pleasure in staying;

I go this far today
and may never go faster
as you may not

on your slick
new Japanese bike
and so what?

if the going
and staying are one,
the coming together and parting.

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CUSHING STROUT

Complementary Portraits: James's Lady and Wharton's Age

In his *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (1947) Percy Lubbock suggested that Henry James first saw her as a novel of his own, "no doubt in his earlier manner." For Lubbock he was the "master of her art" and the "master of her ceremonies" as well, whenever she visited him for one of their exhilarating tours in her car. We are led to see her as a "dazzling intruder" on the great man's solitary dedication to his art. Lubbock's memoir, almost parodically Jamesian in style and temper, ends with a vision of Wharton and James talking together as they disappear over the hill. This biographer's accolade is to say that the development of Wharton's serious literary talent has made her even more Jamesian, as if she were now a "creation of his latest manner." Wharton is engulfed in the legend of the master.

No wonder more recent admirers of Wharton have had to disassociate her from James, as she did herself from his later novels, which she found lacking in "thick nourishing human air." Irving Howe inaugurated this modern trend by arguing that since the observation of manners was only an aspect of her work, subordinated (as it was with James) to "the strength of her personal vision and the incisiveness of her mind," then it was at most only "the lesser James that influenced the lesser Mrs. Wharton." In her most important novels Howe found it hard to detect "any *specific* Jamesian influence." Cynthia Wolff in 1977 completed this process of severance with the purpose of establishing Wharton as a major writer in her own terms. Resonating with the women's movement's interest in reclaiming female writers, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* decisively repudiated the patronizing older tradition of seeing her as merely a clever disciple of James.

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There is an odd assumption, however, in these admirable attempts to do justice to Edith Wharton, an unintended premise that Jamesian comparisons are bound to be invidious. Moreover, the fear of linking her to James reduces the idea of influence to discipleship. I find it indicative of these tendencies that Cynthia Wolff draws back from exploring the striking relationship between James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, their two most widely read and admired works. She recognizes what she calls an "antiphonal" connection between these novels and points out that Wharton's hero (Newland Archer) and James's heroine (Isabel Archer) are further linked when a character in *The Age of Innocence* remarks that Wharton's protagonist looks like a painting, "The Portrait of a Gentleman." Moreover, Wolff knows that both novels involve issues of individual freedom and the sanctity of the marriage bond. But, in the end, the New World setting of Wharton's story, contrasted with the Old World setting of James's, and the mood of "equilibrium and acceptance" in one, contrasted with the tragic hue of the other, lead Wolff to drop the comparison as a misleading one.

The strong case for considering the two novels together goes beyond Wharton's allusions. It notices what James felt he left out of *The Portrait of a Lady*. He tells us that he pressed "least hard" on rendering the male satellites of his heroine, while focusing his attention on Isabel Archer in a way that was vulnerable to the charges of being "too exclusively psychological" and of failing to see the heroine "to the end of her situation." James felt that his book did have the unity of what "groups together," but he added that "the rest may be taken up or not, later." Because Wharton and James were close and mutually admiring friends, it is reasonable to believe that she took seriously these remarks about a work which she considered to be the perfection of his art. His observations gave her an opening for her own talent to take up "the rest" by putting the psychological in a social context, telling the male side of the story more fully, and seeing the heroine and the hero through to the end of their situation. These are the virtues, in fact, of *The Age of Innocence*, which, in this sense, complements *The Portrait of a Lady*.

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To understand how it does may leave us with a clearer sense not only of their different ways of telling a story, but also of their joint interest in a moral theme. Irving Howe emphasizes their different milieux: James's ties through his theological father to New England philosophical idealism and Wharton's ties through parents and husband to "the provincial ruling class of 'old New York.'" But what justifies her reference to their common origins in "old America," whose "last traces" could be found in Europe, is, I suggest, their mutual capacity for appreciating renunciation as both a moral decision and a culturally formed trait or disposition.

Wharton's novel begins with the return to America of Ellen Olenska, who is thinking of divorcing a corrupt Count. It is as if her creator had asked herself what might have happened to James's heroine after she returned to her hateful husband in Rome. The irony of James's story hinged on Isabel Archer's thinking herself unconventional and generous in making a marriage which actually caused her to be "ground in the very mill of the conventional" by a Europeanized dilettante with fraudulent pretensions to unworldliness. (His former mistress, Madame Merle, had also plotted to bring about his marriage with an eye on Isabel's inheritance.) *The Age of Innocence* mirrors this irony in reverse by dramatizing a conventional but decent marriage and making Ellen Olenska conspire to strengthen it for the most moral of reasons. In this story the protagonist, Newland Archer, is the dilettante, who is fascinated with Ellen for her flavor of Europeanized sophistication.

There is a matching central irony here also. When Archer, in his capacity as a lawyer, reluctantly gives Ellen conventional, second-hand advice not to make a family fuss by divorcing her husband, she surprises him by taking this advice seriously in genuinely moral terms as a respect for his own social code and the stability of its life, including the happiness of May Welland, who wants to marry him. He is finally thwarted in his pursuit of Ellen by her own vote for decency, rather than for the courage she might have urged him to have on their own behalf. May has not scrupled after her marriage to put an end to her husband's intrigue with Ellen by confronting her with the premature claim of being pregnant. Ellen re-

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turns to Europe, leaving Archer to the muted sorrows and pleasures of living with his conventional wife.

Isabel's deluded generosity is counterpointed by Ellen's clear-sighted recognition of what an affair would mean and by her generous respect for the stability of May's life. Wharton's heroine acts as if she were an older Isabel, sobered by sorrow, but still unimpaired in her generosity of spirit. When Newland Archer naively tells Ellen that he wants to get away from categories like "mistress" and "wife" in order to be "simply two human beings who love each other," she reminds him that she's known many who have tried to find that country and "believe me, they all got out by mistake at wayside stations: at places like Boulogne, or Pisa, or Monte Carlo—and it wasn't at all different from the old world they'd left, but only rather smaller and dingier and more promiscuous." If she has had to look at the Gorgon, as she puts it, because of her mistaken marriage, it has not only dried her tears, but grimly fastened her eyes open "so that they're never again in the blessed darkness."

Mary McCarthy has observed regretfully in her *Ideas and the Novel* that James's characters rarely have opinions on politics, religion, or art. They discuss only other people. Wharton is more interested in opinions because, as its title announces, *The Age of Innocence* focuses on a milieu, rather than on an individual's state of mind. We may speculate, of course, that Isabel Archer's innocence is also representative, a legacy of a transcendentalist enthusiasm for the possibilities of "free expansion," but James provides her with a minimum of specific social circumstances: dead parents, two nearly invisible married sisters, and pleasant memories of her grandmother's house in Albany and three brief trips across the Atlantic. Isabel's wish is "to leave the past behind her and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh." The impulse is typically American, but it is not peculiar to the personal circumstances of her life. She is comparable to Huck Finn in this respect even though she has been brought up on the music of Gounod, the poetry of Browning, and the prose of George Eliot, as James tells us in an unusually concrete reference.

Newland Archer's marriage, on the other hand, is a tribal rite, as Wharton presents it. It is part of a social pattern that

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allows a man a foolish fling with a married woman before his marriage, abhors the scandal of divorce, keeps a gentleman out of politics (given over to immigrants and their bosses), deprecates intellectual interests, and socially ostracizes those whose business failures can be traced to unethical practices. It is the New York social world of the 1870s, the same decade at the end of which James had conceived the idea for his story about Isabel Archer. She is surrounded not by a society, however, but by displaced persons. (Mrs. Touchett, her aunt, is virtually separated from her husband, who himself lives in England, as an American, with his son, Ralph; Isabel's successful suitor, Gilbert Osmond, is an American expatriate in Rome; his former lover, Madame Merle, is also an expatriated and Europeanized American.) Isabel is vulnerable to serious misinterpretations of her new circumstances because of her romantic imagination and a lack of social cues or clues in a world of displaced persons.

Newland Archer, by contrast, is aware that "in reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs," a system of shared assumptions. In this society May's frankness and innocence, he reflects, "were only an artificial product . . . a creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses, because it was supposed to be what he wanted, what he had a right to, in order that he might exercise his lordly pleasure in smashing it like an image made of snow." If Isabel's reputation as an intellectual young lady hangs about her "like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic," May's status is that of a familiar product of social codes.

When Ellen Olenska comes home to America, she trails some of the same clouds of glory for Newland Archer's eyes that had earlier enveloped James's heroine, and she is now also marked by the scars of a bad marriage to a corrupt man. The two female principals are alike also in making renunciation the crucial action of their lives. Just as Isabel Archer gives up the social and erotic possibilities offered to her, respectively, by Lord Warburton and Caspar Goodwood, so does Ellen carry on this rite of sacrifice by respecting New-

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land Archer's marriage, rather than the personal claims of her own emotional interest in him. In the end, he also earns the right to the name he shares with Isabel by making his own milder act of renunciation. After the death of his wife, he returns at the age of fifty-seven to Ellen's Parisian apartment, where she has lived her life, separated from her husband, who has now died. "There is nothing now to keep them apart," Wharton tells us. But only his son, a child of a freer time, actually visits Madame Olenska. Her former lover concludes that she is more real as a memory than she would be as a living person, and he returns alone to his hotel. Wharton has shown us to the end of their situation, as James deliberately did not do with Isabel and Caspar Goodwood.

These melodious chimings of antiphony also include the novelists' presentation of an inner consistency in the protagonists' characters. Both pay a heavy price in their marriages, both resign themselves to the payment, and both miss a chance for a more sexually fulfilling relationship, because there are other values to consider and because their temperaments tend to incline them as well in directions that are congruent with fidelity to their marriage vows. Newland Archer honors his own past as he looks back on it, yet he also knows that his wife had been "so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious of the change." He may have been a good citizen, responsive enough to Theodore Roosevelt's appeal for active service in politics to work for a year in the State Assembly and to chair civic committees for philanthropy, but "something he knew he had missed: the flower of life." It is incarnated for him in Ellen Olenska as an "imaginary beloved in a book or a picture," the "composite vision of all that he had missed." Still, Wharton makes his final renunciation consistent with his earlier caution as a lover. Once, seeing Ellen at the end of the pier at Newport, he had waited for her to see him first before making himself known, and so had missed a chance for an intimate meeting she was waiting to grant him. Archer lacks the audacity of either Ellen or her grandmother, old Catherine Mingott, who married two of her daughters to Europeans and built a cream-colored stone house ("when brown sand-

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stone seemed as much the only wear as a frock-coat in the afternoon") in "an inaccessible wilderness near Central Park."

Howe, for all his defense of her, criticized Wharton for not being able (unlike James) "to give imaginative embodiment to the human will seeking to resist defeat or move beyond it." As if in reply to him, Wolff presents Newland Archer as a matured person who stays with May because of his "deep-rooted conviction" that "his own moral duty must ultimately be defined by family obligations." If this were true, the terms of his renunciation would be parallel to Isabel's solemn respect for her marriage vows. Yet I believe Wharton does not put her hero on a high plane of moral judgment. She presents him instead in the more mundane context of his half-hearted rebelliousness and detached accommodation to his society. James's story reaches for a more tragic ending, seeking to locate his heroine in the moral consciousness of her situation. In Wharton's novel Isabel's female correlative also has a moral, but less prominent, role to play. Ellen Olenska has the dignity of making a moral decision when she returns Newland Archer's house key to him and accepts the code of decency observed in his society rather than backing her own personal claims. But he only makes his peace with this decision of hers in his final refusal to see her in Paris, when no obligations on either side would have prevented it. There is no moral force by then to his renunciation. It is a matter of realism, of recognizing that too much has flowed under the bridge for him to resume a relationship that had never been consummated.

On closer inspection, James's more tragic conclusion invites our reading it as an ironic commentary on Isabel's romantic predisposition, the motives of her original "fall" recurring in her later renunciation. James relies on the classical idea of a tragic flaw in depicting both the fallen action and her moral response to it. In this respect she is as consistent with her past as her male counterpart is with his history in *The Age of Innocence*. The continuities are symmetrical.

Isabel comes to feel that what she has done deliberately must be accepted because responsibility means accepting the consequences of one's deeds. The obligations of marriage, she believes, are "quite independent of the quality of enjoyment

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extracted from it." This brave sense of the free act entailing a suffering of its consequences, however unpleasant, is the awesome measure of Isabel's moral grandeur. It is not only her historical distance from our present world, with its devaluation of the permanent marriage bond, that makes her challenging, however; it is also because James has given us an ironic foretaste of her renunciation when he first introduces her. Isabel, he notes, had "a certain nobleness of imagination," but he warns us that she was vulnerable to "the danger of keeping up the flag after the place has surrendered; a sort of behavior so crooked as to be almost a dishonour to the flag." From this point of view Isabel's return to her husband provokes us to ask if her seeming maturity dishonors the flag and reflects her deep-seated fear of passion. In this light Isabel's magnanimity, though magnificent, has a dark side. Three good men (Goodwood, Warburton, and her cousin Ralph) love Isabel, but she will have none of them, for they all entrench on her "freedom." But it finds itself in accepting a miserable marriage as a chosen fate.

Isabel Archer's unconventional marriage had the audacity of her provincial ignorance, as Newland Archer's conventional marriage reflects the timidity of his inhibited pursuit of Ellen. But Isabel has her own timidity. The American businessman, Caspar Goodwood, has the power to move her repeatedly to tears of exasperation and turmoil. When he finally kisses her at Gardencourt, the "white lightning" of the kiss and the intensity of his "hard manhood" almost overwhelm her. She flees for freedom and resolves at that moment to follow "a very straight path" back to her hateful husband. Honoring her promise to return to Pansy, the timid child of her husband's old affair with Madame Merle, is an admirable motive in Isabel's grim decision. Yet the decision itself, while reflecting her feeling for the "tremendous vows" she had made at the altar, is also alloyed with a fear of her own sexuality, not merely Goodwood's. She tells her cousin that she's afraid not of her husband, but of herself. Her defiance of her husband's insistence that she not go to see her dying cousin in England enlists our admiring sympathy. Yet her refusal to consider divorce is partly based on her unwillingness, as she tells her friend, Henrietta Stackpole, to "pub-

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lish" her mistake to the world. This shame is too much like false pride to earn our full respect, and it surely alerts the irony in James's affection for her.

We can more easily accept Newland Archer's composure at the end of *The Age of Innocence* because he knows what a steep emotional price he has paid for it and what modest but real benefits his compromised life has brought him. There is an emotional ambiguity in Wharton's accounting, but no moral ambiguity. With Isabel the ambiguity is moral because her sacrifice to an ideal is more evident and costly, while its psychological roots are dubious. She is as passionately aware of her need to repudiate Caspar's passion as she is deeply shamed by her merely considering an escape from her marriage vows. Her consciousness is compounded of moral insight and temperamental inclination, which reinforce each other in bringing about her deed of renunciation. What is disturbing about this merger is the suggestion that it has roots Freud has taught us to see as sexually troubled. Howe makes an illuminating remark in comparing Wharton to Freud in being a rationalist who knows how vulnerable reason is, but an analogous point can be made as well about James's treatment of Isabel's "free spirit." His respect for imagination is matched by his awareness of its fallibility. Still, Isabel is more of an exemplar than a resident of Albany, as much an abstract possibility of the romantic imagination as Conrad's Lord Jim. As innocence betrayed, Isabel becomes innocence recovered through experience by insisting on paying the price for her mistaken choice with the same unselfish but dubious idealism that had generated it.

The asceticism of Wharton's heroine is different. It is the result of her realistic aversion to sexual intrigue and her return to her American roots. She affirms them by taking seriously the code of her lover's society. The innocence in question here is no longer hers, for she has seen the Gorgon. It belongs instead to the New York mores in which May Welland's innocence reflects a social standard of what a young woman should be like, frank, "because she had nothing to conceal, assured because she knew of nothing to be on her guard against; and with no better preparation than this, she was to be plunged overnight into what people evasively called

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'the facts of life.'" She would lack "the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess," the very virtues ironically presupposed by Newland Archer's vision of a "passionate and tender comradeship" as his permanent relation to her. Isabel honors her own ideal of free choice when she makes her renunciation. Ellen and her lover honor the stability of a social code by theirs. Edith Wharton has shown us its limitations sharply enough to prevent any indulgence in sentimental nostalgia for its ways.

Quentin Anderson in *The Imperial Self* alerts us to the Emersonian James in which "the compelling character of history, generational order, places and things leaches out, tends to disappear." But Wharton, who does not appear in his book, is one of those for whom "the urgencies and anomalies of a historical moment" do have force. Her novelistic world is a historical one, and it changes before our eyes. Archer's artistic son and athletic daughter are both freer of the old taboos than their parents were. Archer himself recognizes not only some of the decencies in the older, rigidly stratified New York, but also the advantages in the newer, less stable, more fluid way of life. His son can marry a girl born of an extramarital affair, conducted by an unethical businessman, and after 1900 only the older people would remember the scandal of her father's behavior.

It is a tribute to the vicarious imagination that a man created the female Archer and a woman the male Archer, for James is more like Ralph Touchett than any of his other characters and Wharton is more like the Countess Olenska than anybody else in her story. What their creators have in common, however, is experience of deliberate privation, which enabled them to appreciate renunciation, while feeling its cost. Here too there is a complementary, vital difference. For Wharton the main misery was her twenty-eight year marriage to an unintellectual, unimaginative man, driven to alcohol, drugs, and promiscuity by his own despair at their incompatibility, which was legally recognized in 1913. She had a happy, sensual affair with Morton Fullerton from 1907 to 1910, an episode first revealed in R. W. B. Lewis' biography of her, but sadly it was more serious on her part than on his.

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For James, on the other hand, it was not sex but work that generated his depressions. He was composed about his bachelorhood for it had been intimated early when he wrote of his cousin Minny Temple's youthful death that "it is the *living* ones that die; the writing ones that survive." (He paid her a survivor's tribute in his portrait of Isabel's spirited charm and its brotherly adoration by her dying cousin.) James was plagued instead by a recurring, doomed wish for a smashing success in the theater, an aspiration which regularly compromised his literary standards, diverted him from his novelistic talent, and plunged him into depressions. Wharton acutely recognized this infirmity as a mark of his "Latin feeling" for "*la gloire*." He had saluted the glory of "history, art, fame, and power" most memorably in his recollection of the Napoleonic gallery of Apollo in the Louvre. (When he suffered a stroke shortly before he died, he even imagined himself as Napoleon, dictating a letter about redecorating the Louvre.) For James, the artist's seeing was his life, but the economic failures of his theatrical career and of the New York Edition of his collected works represented deep deprivation in the crucial area of his self-esteem. (The glib nonsense of Freudianized speculation about his sex life has quite missed the point.)

Though their deprivations were different, the meaning of Wharton's claim that they both belonged to an "old America" is increasingly evident from the perspective of our time with its gluttony for self-fulfillment on every imaginable level. James in 1881 and Wharton in 1920 could turn their stories around the idea of renunciation with a respect for its value as well as for its price. Our current assumption that comparison will be prejudicial to Wharton ought not to keep us from recognizing that the relation between these novels is complementary. The two portraits represent a diptych, having a sort of "inverse similitude," as Melville said about one of his pairings of two short sketches. As we look back and forth from one portrait to the other, we see how the individuality of each is preserved without losing sight of the hinges that firmly connect them.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

In a Time of Peace

He changes dollars into francs
and walks, from Rue de Rivoli
almost to the Arc de Triomphe.

He sits at a sidewalk café
and looks at the ones who are passing.
Then goes to a restaurant
and a show.

Someone told him the Crazy Horse
is the place to go, "un spectacle de deux heures"
you can understand "if you're Javanese,
dead drunk, or mentally retarded."
There are sketches, stripteases:
blonde Solange, black Marianne,
Ingrid with her boots and whip . . .
and who can forget Duzia,
"the most wanted girl in Europe"?

The chorus in the entr' actes
jump and squeal. Imagining
their own nudity is driving them mad.

After the show he chooses to walk.
The lamps in leafy avenues
shining on monuments and statues . . .

*

A sea of amethyst is breaking
along two miles of beach umbrellas . . .

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the car parks, red roofs
of the bathing establishments,
Lidino, Antaura . . . advertisements
for Stock, Coca-Cola,
"tutte le Sera DISCOTECA."

A child on the crowded sand
is playing with a new toy.
It hurls an object into the air,
a parachute opens, it descends . . .
homunculus, a little plastic man
returning from Outer Space.

Some day we may have to live there,
but for the present life consists
of sex . . . all the beautiful bodies
that you see on the beach;
food—there are dozens of places,
ranging from the ice cream parlor
to Tito's—Ristorante Tito del Molo;
things to buy: Galletti for handbags,
Timpano for a lighter;
and entertainment: the Cinema Odeon,
the bar with pinball machines.
There is even a Sauna Finlandese.

At night the promenade glitters,
loud music fills the air.
Not good music . . . but it doesn't matter
to the families with small children
or to the lovers.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Angels, Language and the Imagination: A Reconsideration of Rilke's Poetry

POETRY HAS THE POWER TO CONSOLE. When it does so, its function is less exalted than the world-construction of Goethe, who did not need to be consoled, or the reminiscence of Baudelaire, who was willing to forgo consolation for the discipline and pleasures of charity. All the same, poets like Rainer Maria Rilke, who do sometimes manage to reconcile us to the "near-impossibility of living," deserve a respectful reading.

One of Rilke's best friends was Rudolf Kassner, who has described in various memoirs[1] what aspects of life seemed intolerable to him, and what recourse he sought. Generally, Rilke felt himself in exile within a disintegrated world, and looked for a radical reunification which would allow him to live at home, in peace. The great theoretical wellsprings of his own culture were repugnant to him, for he saw in Platonism, Christianity and German Idealism the instruments of division and alienation.

Rilke never understood the European culture which emerged after the Persian Wars, Kassner remarks, and always felt more affinity with an essentially Asian ideal of mystical unity. For Platonism had introduced a split between reality and appearance; and Christianity reinforced this division, setting the body and its sexuality at odds with the soul. Kassner adds that Rilke was always hostile to the figure of Christ, because he sought a direct, unmediated relation to God. Rilke also regarded the "concept" or "idea" of German Idealism, which is supposed to unify our experience, as just another divider, this time falling between subject and object. Rilke never used the word "idea," Kassner writes; instead of ideas, Rilke had angels.

[1] Collected in *Rilke,* Verlag Gunther Neske Pfullingen, 1976.

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Every angel's terrifying. Almost deadly birds
of my soul, I know what you are, but, oh,
I still sing to you! What happened to the days of Tobias
when one of you stood in a simple doorway, partly
disguised for the trip, radiant, no longer appalling . . .
(The Second Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

However, I suspect that Rilke would not have been so concerned by these divisions if he had not been living in a culture plagued by the disappearance of all constitutive principles. Plato's Good and the Christian God ordered and unified the world, guaranteeing a full reality for everything: people had souls, things essences. The circle of God's omniscience assured our position vis-à-vis nature, and provided limits and a purpose for human history.

But, as common knowledge has it, since Copernicus such constitutive principles have been first displaced and then undone. If, for example, one removes God from Descartes's system (a violent but natural thought-experiment), what remains is the human ego, all alone, facing a world of machines. Great power and great powerlessness ensue. For with the device of mathematical physics, the lone ego is supposed to comprehend and control all of nature, and thus function as a constitutor. But at the same time, nature has become something entirely alien, and any basis for the relation between people and nature worse than problematic. The ego is surrounded by its representations and abandoned to the (so posed, insoluble) problem of how to recover the rest of the world. In a sense Kant makes a virtue of the dilemma, arguing that the human mind is indeed the constitutor, but only of its representations; things in themselves are inaccessible to us. Fichte dissolves the things in themselves, making complete the hegemony of the mind as constitutive principle.

Rilke had every reason to be dissatisfied with this situation. The mind is no more plausible a constitutive principle than God, and the theory of representation is a bad epistemological theory, since it renders insoluble the problem of how we can have objective knowledge of the world. Here Rilke is in good company, since this is just the problem of knowledge to which Wittgenstein and Heidegger addressed themselves.

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Moreover, he really grappled with the problem, because he had to; the possibility of poetry depends on the possibility of objective knowledge.

Unfortunately, too often his efforts went, as I believe, in the wrong direction. This happened whenever he went back to searching for a constitutive principle, instead of supposing that there isn't any, and going on from there. His choice of principle was usually angels or language. Inevitably, and fortunately, Rilke couldn't rest content with either of these, and continued to carry on his poetic experiments with greater variety and subtlety than most critics give him credit for.

Erich Heller suggests[2] that Rilke first attempted to resolve the disaccord between inner experience and the external world by trying to plunge himself into things with the *Ding-Gedichte* of the *New Poems*. As I shall argue later, this sheer plunge has to be unsuccessful, because it tries to circumvent the difficulties inherent in the pathetic fallacy. Modern philosophy, science and technology have in some sense cast us off from nature, but that rupture won't be cured by denying that it has taken place.

Disappointed in the attempt, so Heller argues, Rilke tried an inverse strategy in the *Duino Elegies* and tried to save the poor things by plunging them in himself.

> And these things, whose lives
> are lived in leaving— they understand when you praise them.
> Perishing, they turn to us, the most perishable, for help.
> They want us to change them completely in our invisible hearts,
> oh— forever— into us! Whoever we may finally be.
>
> Earth, isn't this what you want: to resurrect
> in us invisibly? Isn't it your dream
> to be invisible one day? Earth! Invisible!
> What's your urgent charge, if not transformation?
>
> (The Ninth Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

[2] "The Poet's Journey into the Interior," *Nirgends wird Welt sein als innen* (Suhrkamp, 1975).

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The poet's task is to make the visible invisible, to save the world by bringing it into a version of pure subjectivity which Rilke calls *Weltinnenraum*.

As Heller observes, if things rendered invisible are only representations, then their removal into *Weltinnenraum* is just another form of Idealism.

> Love, the World exists nowhere but within.
> Our life is lived in transformation. And, diminishing,
> the outer world vanishes.
> (The Seventh Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

Rilke must believe that the transformation is a transubstantiation, where things are taken up in some kind of corporality. On what grounds, Heller concludes by asking, could Rilke claim that a real resurrection of things takes place in the poet's work?

The answer, I believe, lies in Rilke's conception of the "Open" as it is developed in the Eighth Elegy, dedicated to Rudolf Kassner. Kassner tells us that both he and Rilke were greatly attracted by what they understood of Zen Buddhism, as a long discipline culminating in a seamless unity achieved between a person and the world. How else understand the blind-folded archer whose arrows always hit the target, Kassner asks, if not by supposing that he contains the arrow and target already within him? In such a state, Rilke writes, "a bird / would take its flight through you as through the air." In this Open, where all western metaphysical distinctions vanish, time also vanishes; there is no succession, but past and future exist together in a magical present.

Animals, Rilke suggests in the Eighth Elegy, inhabit the Open.

> All other creatures look into the Open
> with their whole eyes . . .
> . . . the free animal
> always has its destruction behind
> and god ahead, and when it moves,
> it moves toward eternity like running springs.
> (The Eighth Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

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For they are not caught in self-reflectiveness, nor in historical time, as we are, but enjoy an immediate relation to the world.

Yet it is not animals, but angels, which provide Rilke with his spiritual model, for angels manage to inhabit the Open and exercise a reflective consciousness at the same time.

> . . . spaces of being, force fields of ecstasy, storms
> of unchecked rapture, and suddenly, separate,
> *mirrors*: each drawing its own widespread
> streaming beauty back into its own face.
> (The Second Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

Whatever we reflect on, eludes us; but in angelic reflection, nothing gets lost.

The poet is to attain this state of unity through a spiritual discipline, in which he spins out his own solitude, his *Weltinnenraum*, wider and wider around him until, in the infinite limit, it becomes the Open. Thus arises the claim of substantial resurrection, for the Open really is the world, united with the poet. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke often refers to this task of growing the space of one's own solitude, a growth "painful as the growing of boys and sad as the beginning of springtimes." He writes, as much to himself as to the young poet: "For those who are near you are far, you say, and that shows it is beginning to grow wide around you. And when what is near to you is far, then your distance is already among the stars and very large . . ."

The *Letters to a Young Poet* were written after Rilke had left his wife and daughter in the artist's colony in Worpswede, never again to return to domestic life. The rest of his days were spent in relative poverty, relative solitude, and in a poetic production scored by long silences. Clearly, he was guided by a spiritual ideal, which was difficult both for himself and for others. The most sympathetic readings of Rilke stem from those who view him as belonging to the tradition of mysticism. Thus the young Auden, despairing over the violent world around him, invoked Rilke:

> Who through ten years of silence worked and waited,
> Until in Muzot all his powers spoke,
> And everything was given once for all:

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> And with the gratitude of the Completed
> He went out in the winter night to stroke
> That little tower like a great animal.

Robert Bly offers such a reading in his *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*.[3] This book, the product of a long and appreciative familiarity with Rilke's work, combines translations of poems selected from all stages of Rilke's career with an informal, personal and lively commentary. It is a good invitation and first guide to Rilke's poetry, and the following passage is characteristic:

> His [Rilke's] poem "The Solitary Person" helped me so much in my twenties. Like many others of my generation, I was trying to live for my talent or maybe for "the infinite," with almost no money, in a rented room with one chair and a table, not talking. What a shock it was to go home for Thanksgiving. The sofas and the self-confident turkey said that the life I was leading was wrong; they were right. But Rilke's poems say to the young man or woman that the "objectless" life they are leading is not wrong. The not fitting in they experience comes from the best part of themselves, not the weakest part, and the pain is the cracking of the walls as the room grows. Writing these poems, Rilke is not an aesthete, but a wise grandfather.

Though I feel a certain sympathy for Bly's reflections here, I find no consolation in Rilke's mysticism as long as it orients itself towards an angelic unity, for the ideal strikes me as a false one. I will try to support this rather harsh judgment by re-examining the very conditions which gave rise to Rilke's problematic, and how they bear on the practice of poetry. Moreover, many of Rilke's poems testify that he himself was driven far beyond dreams of angelic unity.

Richard Jayne goes beyond Heller's analysis in an illuminating way.[4] He argues that Rilke's notion of *Weltinnenraum*, where human consciousness seems to fuse with the uncon-

[3] (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

[4] "Rilke and the Problem of Poetic Inwardness," in *Rilke: The Alchemy of Alienation* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1980).

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scious world of things, depends upon a "physiognomic perception of reality." Such perception finds people and things related through mutual recognition, and gives nature a human face: thus the strange image in the Second Elegy of angels as self-enveloping mirrors, divine Klein bottles. Rilke's Open invokes the pathetic fallacy in full force, and an anachronistic view of people and nature linked directly as kin in one great genealogy.

However, the conditions of modernity were not so easily abolished. On the one hand, Jayne points out, there was the spectre of German Idealism, raising the question whether our constructions (and the poet's constructions in particular) bear any relation to the world as it really is. (This question, which stems from the theory of representation, is wrongly posed, but it bothered Rilke, as it still bothers us.) On the other hand, I would add, stands the testimony of both the natural and human sciences which have effected the deanthropomorphization of nature and our cultural coming of age. The only possible use of the pathetic fallacy now is a playful or ironic one, the kind that Auden mastered in his wonderful *Bucolics*.

Rilke had to doubt whether nature recognizes man and thus, whether his *Weltinnenraum* had any objective basis.

> Always facing creation, all we see
> is the reflection of the free and open
> that we've darkened, or some mute animal
> raising its calm eyes and seeing through us
> and through us. This is destiny: to be opposites,
> always, and nothing else but opposites.
> (The Eighth Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

If nature is truly Other, then perhaps *Weltinnenraum* is only an empty, self-reflexive game which the poet plays with himself, and its achievement of unity and totality only an illusion. Then all that he can offer is a purely arbitrary projection of himself on the world, like Narcissus, to whom Rilke attributes the following reflection on his reflection:

> Now, in unfeeling water, it exposes
> itself completely, and I may confer
> with it for hours under my crown of roses.

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It is not loved down there. There's nothing there
but pebbles rolling round indifferently.
And I can see my melancholy stare.
Was this the image of her eyes in me?
(tr. J. B. Leishman)

Here, disappointed, Rilke retreats into aestheticism. Unwilling to relinquish his desire for a unity or totality, he is forced to give up the hope that this unity corresponds to anything real. The object of poetry then is merely aesthetic and linguistic; Orpheus makes a virtue of giving up Eurydice.

This festival, my heart, relinquish too.
What are the proofs that it belongs to you?
Just as a rising wind will bend and chase,
some feeling rises up in you to race
whither? Chase what? Bend what? And beyond feeling
loom worlds on worlds.
(tr. J. B. Leishman)

This saving of *Weltinnenraum* at the expense of referentiality is a Pyrrhic victory for poetry. And it is surely a grave failing of Rilke's mysticism that it so easily reverts to aestheticism. What else can mysticism be, however, in the absence of a great popular religion? St. John of the Cross without the context of Catholicism is unthinkable. Generally, Rilke's longing for angelic or linguistic unity vitiated his poetic gifts; and the bitterness of certain passages in the *Elegies*, "Before Christmas 1914" and "Poems to the Night" shows that Rilke sensed this.

Paul DeMan places Rilke's poetry within the closed circle of language, not angels.[5] His one-sided reading of Rilke generates a brilliant formal analysis of the *New Poems* and the *Elegies*, and his polemic is instructive even when it is, as I believe, wrong-headed.

At the beginning of *Allegories of Reading*, DeMan makes the interesting observation that the grammatical and rhetorical structures within a literary work may not be in accord with

[5] "Tropes (Rilke)," in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

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one another. In fact, he argues, rhetoric is a deflection, a "dialectical subversion of the consistent link between sign and meaning that operates within grammatical patterns." In his subsequent analysis of literary works, however, he grants rhetoric a merely negative employment vis-à-vis our knowledge of the world, so its deflections appear to move only on the level of language.

Does this mean, then, that poetry, which is so thoroughly figural play, is truest to itself when it renounces referentiality? DeMan seems to be ambivalent on this count. For such "pure" poetry, though well-suited to his critical apparatus and his principle that rhetoric should not be reduced to grammar, also tends to exhaust its own thematic possibilities and must lie whenever it pretends to tell the truth.

DeMan is right to oppose those critics and philosophers of language who want to establish an unambiguous, transparent relation between language and the world. Yet in limiting rhetoric to deflective patterns on the surface of language, he also limits the force of his opposition. One can more directly attack the champions of ideal prose, or defend the rights of poetry against them, by showing how figures play a positive role in our exploration of the world and in the development of our knowledge. I suspect that DeMan does not take this approach because he is a classical skeptic; though not my own, skepticism is always a serious philosophical alternative.

Rilke's consolations, according to DeMan, are the phonic beauty of his verse, unreferential as music, and the elegant formal closure of his figures, specifically chiasmus. Ordinary chiasmus is the inversion of the second of two parallel phrases or clauses, producing patterns like "noun_a verb_b $\text{verb}_{b'}$ $\text{noun}_{a'}$." In the tradition of Kenneth Burke, DeMan elevates chiasmus to a Master Trope, and gives it the generalized function of crossing and fusing categories or predicates, especially those usually considered incompatible, like word and thing, subject and object, up and down, inner and outer. The formal balance of this reversed symmetry, like a vase of roses next to its enantiomorph in a mirror, is so satisfying that we overlook the category mistakes and inconsistencies it engenders, and accept the compossibility of the whole.

The trope of chiasmus is a wonderful key to reading the

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New Poems and the *Elegies*, even if one doesn't accept DeMan's conclusions. Again and again, these poems present a thing, person or event at whose heart lies a negativity or absence: "the absences create the space and play needed for the reversals, and finally lead to a totalization which they seemed, at first, to make impossible." So, for example, blindness leads to a truer perception in this poem about a girl going blind:

> . . . upon her bright eyes, that rejoiced,
> was light from outside as upon a pool.
>
> She followed slowly, taking a long time,
> as though something had not yet been surmounted;
> and yet as though, after a crossing over,
> she would no longer walk, but fly.
>
> (tr. M. D. Herter Norton)

So too a sundial at night evokes all of time, a falling ball the self-absorbed happiness of play, Eurydice's disappearance the songs of Orpheus.

For DeMan, the *Dinge* of the *New Poems* are hardly things at all, much less things as they really are; rather, they are linguistic occasions for Rilke to exercise his phonic and figural strategies. The contrast with Bly's presentation of the *New Poems* here is telling. Bly praises the *Ding-Gedichte* as Rilke's triumph over his earlier subjectivity, as a "sober and spontaneous" observation of the outer world, implying that Rilke has indeed presented us with things as they are in themselves. Here Rilke joins company, so Bly claims, with Ponge, Dürer, the Chinese painters influenced by Buddhism, and Goethe.

By now it should be clear that I doubt anyone can have immediate access to the things of nature. Our rapprochement must be complex and indirect, though clearly a cure for the murderous Cartesian severance is needed. Moreover, many of Rilke's *Ding-Gedichte*, far from being sober and spontaneous observation, are too often unfocussed by a subjectivity which, distracted by angels or language, does not pay sufficient attention to the world.

Hans Egon Holthusen, reproaching Rilke for his dreamy

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subjectivity, in fact mentions Goethe in his reproach.[6] Goethe never excluded the descriptive sciences and history from the world which he worked up into poetry. Every reader of the *Italienische Reise* will recall the loving detail in which Goethe recorded the plants and geological formations, the faces, customs and local history of the people he encountered, the paintings and antiquities he was privileged to see. Auden wrote of Goethe: "He always refused to separate the beautiful from the necessary, for he was convinced that one cannot really appreciate the beauty of anything without understanding what made it possible, and how it came into being. To Goethe, a man who looks at a beautiful cloud without knowing, or wishing to know, any meteorology, at a landscape without knowing any geology, at a plant without studying its structure and way of growth, at the human body without studying anatomy, is imprisoning himself in that aesthetic subjectivity which he deplored as the besetting sin of the writers of his time." Compare the vivid world revealed in the *Italienische Reise*, or in Keats's "Ode to Autumn," with this landscape from the Tenth Elegy.

> She shows him the tall trees
> of tears, the flowering fields of sadness
> (the living know them only as tender leaves);
> she shows him herds of pasturing grief; and sometimes
> a frightened bird flying across their line of vision
> scrawls the huge glyph of its desolate cry.
> (The Tenth Elegy, tr. A. Poulin)

Here Rilke deserves Holthusen's reproach for writing poetry in a language which sleeps with itself, where the subjective, lyrical "I" proliferates rapidly, and the "non-I" is enervated and disembodied to the point of unreality.

A number of such linguistically autoerotic poems are to be found in the *New Poems*; "Der Schwan" is a good example:

[6] "The Poet and the Lion of Toledo," *TAOA*.

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This clumsy living that moves lumbering
as if in ropes through what is not done
reminds us of the awkward way the swan walks.

And to die—which is a letting go
of the ground we stand on and cling to every day—
is like the swan when he nervously lets himself down

into the water, which receives him gaily
and which flows joyfully under
and after him, wave after wave,
while the swan, unmoving and marvelously calm,
is pleased to be carried, each minute more fully grown,
more like a king, composed, farther and farther on.

(tr. Robert Bly)

Here the chiasmus, more than usually totalized, must do all the work, since the rest of the poem is so helpless: no narrative, little observation and an arbitrary, inexplicable use of the pathetic fallacy. For dramatic action, we have a swan getting into the water; for descriptive detail, the commonplace that swans waddle when they walk and swim gracefully. There is hardly enough substance here to carry a light verse, and the whole would sink immediately under the metaphysical ballast Rilke loads it with, except for the elegant chiasmus which effaces walking in swimming, and life in death, in one smooth mirroring. Why should we believe this swan has anything to do with the mysterious transition from life to death? Why should we accept the conclusion that life is less fitting for us than death? Even if we are out of our element in life, the analogy is confused, for swans are quite content to be on land, even if their form of locomotion there looks ungainly.

Since my object here is not to belittle Rilke, but to show the harm which the allure of totalization sometimes does to his poetry, I offer as a successful counterpart to this poem Baudelaire's "Le Cygne." Neither the vivid narrative, the many references to literary and social history, the sensuous detail nor the affecting, plausible use of the pathetic fallacy are stifled by a figural closure. There *are* open figures which go on talking, as well as closed figures which must have the last

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word; Rilke at his best produced the former, DeMan and Jayne to the contrary.

"Le Cygne" develops within an open chiasmus where exile and home, past and present continue to change places and neither is subsumed by the other. It also presents imagination and human charity as ways of knowing and loving in the absence of the old constitutors. Baudelaire, walking beside the Louvre where the always energetic and high-class city planners of Paris had wiped out a complex of medieval streets for palatial additions, invokes Andromache, weeping for her lost Troy. At the same time he recalls a swan he once saw there, which had escaped from a little zoo which used to exist amid the rich confusion of old streets. It could not understand its dangerous situation, and bathed itself in dust as if it were still in its "beau lac natal." The swan, Baudelaire concludes, is like the poor and displaced wandering the streets of Paris, and like the poet himself.

Whereas Rilke's earthbound swan is faintly comic, Baudelaire gives us good reason to pity his swan, and to understand it, for in particularizing its situation he shows how it is both like and unlike us. Animals belong in their ecological niches; in the terms of philosophical anthropology, their *Umwelt* is closed. Thus they don't travel well; certainly they can't understand their displacement, and often it kills them. All the same, the swan's instinctual activity, appropriate to its beautiful lake, is the beginning of what will ultimately develop into human memory.

People, on the other hand, live in a world which has become always more and more open. We live elsewhere, imaginatively, at the same time that we make our home somewhere, projecting ourselves into the past and future, and over the next horizon. So people have always been travellers, tomb-builders and prophets; so, too, the pilgrimage, quest or voyage is a common and compelling literary topic, which usually concludes, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, by bringing the voyager home. For we make our home on the ground of an elsewhere.

Although German Idealism is partly responsible for the bad metaphysics of representation and totalization, it offers at the same time an important recourse, the notion of active

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imagination. This notion replaces, for example, the passive and merely sensory version which appears in Descartes's doctrine. Rilke sometimes failed to profit from this recourse, given his grudge against time, yet Kassner, among others, recognized its power, and Rilke does sometimes turn to it.

Kant showed that all knowledge which is minimally objective, which involves the application of concepts, must be imaginative and temporal. For it must include both a memory and anticipation of its object, thus going beyond what is given "here and now." Moreover, since our concepts never capture the thing in its concrete particularity, but only as a member of a class of things, in thinking about it we consider not only what it is, but what it is not, namely, similar things in the same class which are not identical with it. This means that the same synthetic activity of knowing which allows an object to be present for us also entails that it eludes us. It is never *all there*, since what it has been, will be, might have been in other circumstances, are inevitably part of its objectivity.

And this is the minimal case. Our experience includes people, events, actions, and so forth, as well as objects; it is thoroughly valuational, moral and historical. So much the more is our knowledge actively imaginative, and the creatures of our experience real and elusive. Other people—the ones we love, fight, remember, desire, the most vivid and intimate realities—are also the most incompletely "given," and are those for whose sake the greatest leaps of imagination are required. Is this cause for mourning (*Klage*), as it so often seems to be with Rilke? For such knowing and having, though shot through with negativity, are knowing and having nonetheless.

Baudelaire writes,

> Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
> Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)

and again,

> Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancholie
> N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
> Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie . . .

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The great irony here is that the poet in exile is writing from his home town. One potential danger of modernity (embodied in the city planners of Paris, alas, even now) is that it continually revises itself, threatening to drown everything in a kind of Heracleitean flux. Yet, since we are stuck with this revision, we should also seek its positive aspect. The consciousness that social structures are contingent, not necessary or natural, confers both power and freedom and forces us to be active. For we must construct the world we live in, not out of thin air, but with respect to the enabling and constraining conditions of the past. The new science of history teaches that the present is very different from the past, and the future will be very different from the present; anthropology demonstrates the heterogeneity of cultures. Thus the work of world-construction requires imagination and in particular the synthetic instruments of analogy and figure. (Likewise the new science of nature teaches how different the natural world is from history, and itself decomposes into special sciences; here again thought which moves through figures is needed to relate such heterogeneous domains.) Whoever claims that the poet, master of tropes, has no function in the modern world, hasn't given that world close enough attention.

Baudelaire shows precisely how the poet's gifts of melancholy and allegory (and hope and charity, while I'm listing virtues, all of them high energy levels of the imagination) retrieve his home, Paris, in the very experience of exile. The poet recalls Paris in her past richness and present poverty in all the concreteness of well-observed detail:

> . . . ce camp de baraques,
> Ces tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts,
> Les herbes, les gros blocs verdis par l'eau des flaques,
> Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus.

(Rilke loses Paris altogether in the City of Pain in the Tenth Elegy, or the endless showplace where Madame LaMort displays her winter hats in the Fifth.) Baudelaire also remembers (indeed, translates directly) Vergil remembering Homer and Andromache remembering Hector, invoking tradition which

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does, after all, salvage human words and deeds from futility. Finally, he makes common cause with the homeless poor, not only here but all through the *Tableaux Parisiens*. As Priam and Achilles realize at the end of the *Iliad*, the real consolation for human suffering and loss is that we share it. The gods are ignorant of this consolation; therefore, we can ignore the gods.

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge is sometimes cited as the natural companion piece to Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*. Yet here too I claim that Paris evaporates. For Rilke treats the disintegrated world of Paris and the people who suffer within it not for their own sake, but as a means toward *Weltinnenraum*. Walter Sokel argues[7] that Malte is aiming towards an immolation or disappearance of the ego, entailed, as we have seen, in the achievement of a mystical unity with the world. This ideal is realized by his maternal grandfather, who dies his "own death," in the Parisian beggars who have lost themselves in their amputations and wounds, and the man afflicted by St. Vitus' dance, whom Malte observes on a Paris street as he is taken over by his disease.

Rilke begins in nausea, Baudelaire in spleen, reacting against the spectacle of Paris in her broken neighborhoods. Yet Rilke turns towards the project of dying one's own death, retreating into a solitude where the ego disintegrates and expands into the cosmos. Mystics always run the risk of being cold-hearted towards this world, since their investments are elsewhere. Baudelaire, on the other hand, turns towards the exiles who share Paris with him, finding in charitable love (which is, indeed, often horrified and angry) and in mortality itself, the means for a piecemeal unity which is forged link by uncertain link.

Poetry, DeMan claims, is most convincing and essentially poetic when it renounces its pretension to objectivity. This claim rests at once on his skepticism and his critique of the old, bad, totalizing metaphysics. But in order truly to defend the possibility of poetry (and figurative thought generally), one must develop the latter critique while avoiding the traps of skepticism. The key here, I believe, is the notion of active

[7] "The Devolution of the Self in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*," *TAOA*.

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imagination, and a conception of objective knowledge which, having dispensed with constitutive principles, will be heterogeneous, inconsistent, revisable and capable of surprises. Baudelaire does give us Paris, objectively, in a way that Rilke does not. DeMan also says that "to the extent that metaphor can be thought of as a language of desire and as a means to recover what is absent, it is essentially anti-poetic." But objective knowledge, conceived so that figure has a positive function within it, is on the contrary quite erotic, in Plato's Diotima's sense, the child of poverty and invention. Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" is all the more poetic for its eros, and all the more successful in its recovery of the desirable, imagined and elusive world.

What I have said so far, however, does not do justice to the scope and power of Rilke's poetry. For Rilke engages the dilemmas of modernity, as they occur both at the level of lived experience and (more often) of metaphysics, in ways which are much richer than DeMan and Jayne recognize. When he forgets his grudge against time and leaves his angels to their own devices, as irrelevant to the human gift or burden of imagination, Rilke sometimes abstains from closing off his figures. Then the phonic and figural formal beauty of his poetry is neither extrinsic nor misleading, but, like the sculptor's marble, serves to insure the preservation of the work.

In his subtle analysis of the poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," DeMan argues that Rilke's application of chiasmus to the polarity subject/object entails that poetic language renounce its referentiality, for in such cases totalization depends upon the absence of the object. Thus *Weltinnenraum* is the closed circle of language biting its own tail. However, he goes on to say, since such poetry involves subjective experiences, chosen for their negative dimensions and presented with pathos and fervor, it is not harmless: it makes us forget "the formal and fictional nature of the unity [it celebrates]." Here he must be assuming that this poetry cannot refer, because the totalities which it celebrates cannot exist. How does he know that? His (and my) metaphysical commitments require it.

If, then, in various poems Rilke employs an open chiasmus, where the object is not absent but, so to speak, perforated,

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and the unity celebrated is not total but piecemeal, there is no reason to claim that these poems must forgo their claim to speak to our experience. Indeed, given the nature of our experience divested now of constitutive principles, such poems will be especially apt for its expression. This is so, I believe, with Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (again in Bly's translation, which falters only at the end of the second stanza.)

> We have no idea what his fantastic head
> was like, where the eyeballs were slowly swelling. But
> his body now is glowing like a gas lamp,
> whose inner eyes, only turned down a little,
>
> hold their flame, shine. If there weren't light, the curve
> of the breast wouldn't blind you, and in the swerve
> of the thighs a smile wouldn't keep on going
> toward the place where the seeds are.
>
> If there weren't light, this stone would look cut off
> where it drops clearly from the shoulders,
> its skin wouldn't gleam like the fur of a wild animal,
>
> and the body wouldn't send out light from every edge
> as a star does . . . for there is no place at all
> that isn't looking at you. You must change your life.

Although, as we have seen, Rilke's chiasmus in the *Ding-Gedichte* tends to suppress the question of the pathetic fallacy, it produces happier results when applied to people and human artifacts. The last line of this sonnet, for example, is amply justified, at once inviting us back into the poem, and throwing us on our own resources.

The chiasmus pivots on the poles of sightlessness/vision; because the statue has no eyes it is somehow all the more able to return our gaze. To make the same claim about a headless doll, as Rilke does elsewhere, would be to trivialize it, but this poem offers us the artifact of a great culture and master sculptor, which moreover represents Apollo, the god of music and distances. Rilke's reflection here, much like Keats's in "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," stems equally from the stat-

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ue's genius and its state of decay, which dramatize the persistence and evanescence of human imagination and its products. The statue demands our imaginative reconstruction, and we are able to respond. We are willing to expend the effort because of the statue's persistent beauty, but that effort is both rewarding and wounding; for as we are caught up in it, we experience a transcendence which connects us with the past, and a very real, irrevocable loss. "We have no idea what his fantastic head / was like."

The chiasmus finally places us in a unity which is only the unity of conversation, an exchange of glances, between ourselves and the statue with its dark sculptor, culture, god looming behind. There is no totalization here, only doubtful vision crossing history, encountering the objects of its desire dressed in opacity.

DeMan reads the *Sonnets to Orpheus* as Rilke's final concession that he is celebrating a totality "capable of naming the remaining presence of being beyond death and beyond time" which is only an event of language. The sonnet which begins "Sieh den Himmel. Heisst kein Sternbild 'Ritter'?" (I. 11), so DeMan argues, indicates that Rilke realized "the figure's truth turns out to be a lie at the very moment when it asserts itself in the plenitude of its promise." But if Rilke is only admitting that Orpheus is Narcissus, why are the *Sonnets* so often celebratory in tone, poems of *Preis*, not *Klage*? Again, Rilke's figures may well retain their referentiality without being deceitful, if they avoid the lure of totalization. Indeed, since the *Sonnets* are devoted to the active imagination, which all people share but which the poet raises to its purest and most self-conscious pitch, we are quite likely to find there figures which are not closed.

The Sonnet I. 10 (which Bly chooses to conclude his book), for example, ends on a note of deliberation, a reflective balancing of the polarities empty/full, death/life, silence/song. The chiasmus turns on the figure of a mouth: the mouths of empty Roman sarcophagi, full of running water (which makes a natural music) or flowers and butterflies (which are a visual music, and silent); the poet's mouth, which sings "after having known what silence is." The poetic locus is the one used by Valéry in "Le Cimetière Marin" or by Seferis in "The King of Asine," where the poet is compared to a cistern, half-

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empty, half-full, and sonorous; the poet sings out of an internal hollow.

> . . . all that a person wrenches from doubt
> I greet, the mouths opened again
> after having known what silence means.
>
> Do we know, friends, do we or not?
> These two mold the hesitating span
> of time into features of the human.
> (tr. A. Poulin)

Both doubt and knowledge, woven together in a complex temporality which lingers as it passes, compose human experience.

This same imaginative existence, carried on by the creature who invented the passage of time in order to persist within it, who tears itself out of nature and out of the "here and now" in order to construct a world where it lives as both host and stranger, is celebrated in Sonnet II. 29:

> . . . In this vast night, be the magic power
> at your senses' intersection,
> the meaning of their strange encounter.
>
> And if the earth has forgotten
> you, say to the still earth: I flow.
> To the rushing water speak: I am.
> (tr. A. Poulin)

Though lacking Goethe's objectivity and the charity of Baudelaire, the *Sonnets to Orpheus* nonetheless offer a consolation for our troubles which is neither anachronistic nor illusory. Few lines of poetry reconcile me more to this life than the following, taken from the same sonnet, the last one. Cultivators of the grape, poets, dreamers: we know, after all, how to draw something sweet and intoxicating from what is broken.

> Geh in der Verwandlung aus und ein.
> Was ist deine leidenste Erfahrung?
> Ist dir Trinken bitter, werde Wein.

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ROBERT ASAHINA

Theatre Chronicle

FOR A CHANGE, this year's Pulitzer Prize actually went to the season's most deserving work: Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play*, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company and directed by Douglas Turner Ward. But it deserves criticism as well as praise.

Set in 1944, *A Soldier's Play* could also have been written then; it is a straightforward piece of psychological realism that takes the form of a murder mystery. In the first scene, Vernon C. Waters (Adolph Caesar), a Tech/Sergeant in the 221st Chemical Smoke Generating Company, is killed by two unknown assailants. Waters is black, as are the other noncoms and enlisted men at Fort Neal, Louisiana, in the year before the end of World War II. Suspecting that the killers are white and fearing a racial conflict between the soldiers and the residents of the nearby town of Tynan, the white officers restrict their troops to the base and order an investigation.

A black captain, Richard Davenport (Charles Brown), assigned to the military police, arrives at Fort Neal to conduct the inquiry (and to narrate the play, which largely consists of flashbacks). Davenport is reluctantly assisted by a white captain, Charles Taylor (Peter Friedman), a West Pointer who makes known his antagonism by aggressively announcing, "I never saw a Negro until I was twelve or thirteen." Still, it is clear to both of them that the investigation is supposed to fail, since everyone assumes that the murderers are white and will thus be impossible to bring to justice in the South. "Don't take yourself too seriously," Taylor warns Davenport, who sardonically acknowledges that "the matter was given the lowest priority."

Nonetheless, the black captain persists, eventually daring to cast suspicion on two white officers, Lieutenant Byrd (Sam McMurray) and Captain Wilcox (Stephen Zettler). By this time, Taylor has grudgingly come to respect Davenport's efforts; in fact, he is even more eager than his black colleague to bring charges against his fellow whites. But Davenport has begun to believe that the case is more than an incident of racial violence. His questioning of the black soldiers gradually leads him—and us—to the uncomfortable realization that the murder was committed by someone under Waters' command.

As the captain digs deeper, a complex portrait of the dead sergeant emerges from the flashbacks that spring out of the interrogation sessions around which the play is structured. A veteran of World War I, Waters is a career man and a strict disciplinarian who expects his troops to toe the white man's line as squarely as he does.

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When he busts Corporal James Wilkie (Steven A. Jones) to the rank of private for being drunk on duty, Waters complains, "No wonder they treat us like dogs." His favorite target for abuse is a Southern black, Private C. J. Memphis (David Alan Grier), who represents everything he despises. Pleasant but slow-witted, Memphis is the star of the company baseball team, as well as a mournful blues guitarist and singer. But to Waters, a Northerner, Memphis is nothing but an embarrassing exemplar of a "strong black buck." "Niggers aren't like that today," the sergeant sneers.

Waters is no simple Uncle Tom, however. "This country's at war," he tells his men, "and you niggers are soldiers." To him, they must be more than good soldiers—they must be the best, for their own sake if not the army's. "Most niggers just don't care," he claims. "But not havin's no excuse for not gettin'. We got to challenge the man in *his* arena." In his twisted way, Waters truly believes that the black race can only advance by following his example—by being better than the white man at his own game. "Do you know the damage one ignorant Negro can do?" he asks Memphis. "The black race can't afford you laughin' and clownin'."

Davenport soon learns the lengths to which Waters went to "close our ranks on the chittlins and collard greens style." During the year before his death, the company team had been so successful that a game with the Yankees was in the works if the Fort Neal soldiers were to win their conference title. But the better the troops do on the field, the worse they do on the base. "Every time we beat them at baseball," the soldiers complain about their white opponents, "they get back at us any way they can"—in work details ranging from KP to painting the officers' club. Waters, of course, believes "these men need all the discipline they can get," since he regards their athletic achievements as frivolous, even dangerous, because they reinforce the white man's stereotype of the black.

To his horror, Davenport discovers that Waters found a way of eliminating Memphis while simultaneously sabotaging the team. The sergeant framed the hapless private for a mysterious shooting on the base ("one less fool for the race to be ashamed of"), and when Memphis killed himself in the stockade, the players threw the championship game in protest. But the cost of Waters' demented discipline was a growing desire for vengeance among his troops. As Davenport finally determines, two of them—Private First Class Melvin Peterson (Denzel Washington) and Private Tony Smalls (Brent Jennings)—took matters into their own hands and killed their tormentor. Yet even at the moment of his death, Waters had the last word, or words—the same ones that opened the play. "You got to be like them," he cries in torment. "But the rules are fixed. It doesn't make any difference. They still hate you."

Whatever else can be said about *A Soldier's Play*, Fuller must be credited for creating a truly tragic character for whom those words

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are an anguished, self-proclaimed epitaph. It is in Waters that the toll of racism is most apparent. To be sure, all the black characters in the drama are representative of different modes of dealing with white oppression: the cautious rationality of Davenport, the self-abasement of Wilkie (brilliantly brought to life by Jones), the unenlightened self-interest of Smalls. Likewise, Memphis embodies the black past, stolid and humble, just as surely as Peterson does the future, or at least one possible future: righteous but also arrogant.

Yet Waters is unique among the men by being both the engineer of his own downfall and the victim of his circumstances; like all genuinely tragic figures, he attains universality because of rather than despite the stubborn reality of his particularity. From the smallest of his affectations—the pompous, gravelly voice, the pipe-smoking, the military carriage, the cultivated disdain for his inferiors—to the enormity of his crimes against his own people in their name, the costs of Waters' unnatural, willful assimilation are painfully apparent. ("Any man don't know where he belongs," says Memphis, "got to be in a lot of pain.") Fuller's resolute writing and Caesar's forceful acting have created a truly unlikeable yet strangely sympathetic character, unpleasant yet unexpectedly revealing of what we fear as the worst accommodationist impulses in ourselves.

Unfortunately, Fuller does not handle the investigation into Waters' violent death as ably as he does the sergeant's tortured life. Somehow the murder mystery comes to dominate the other elements of the play; the larger problems of human behavior in adverse circumstances become secondary to the whodunit questions of motive and opportunity. True, the investigation gives the drama a certain forward momentum, but not enough to disguise the fact that almost everything interesting takes place in the past. The most compelling figure is the victim, whose life is revealed in flashback; the action in the present is, for the most part, structured according to the familiar strategy of revelations leading to further revelations and ultimately to a rather comfortable resolution.

Not too comfortable, mind you; Fuller is to be commended for honestly exposing how racism distorts the soul of not just the oppressor but the victim. For this genuine revelation (as opposed to the convenient revelations that advance the plot) to matter to us, however, it must matter to the character through whose eyes we perceive it. And it is not unreasonable to expect that Davenport's discoveries will change him—somehow. After all, he began his inquiry more or less convinced that the killers were white, and then had to overcome his own prejudices to uncover the truth. He could also see something of himself in Waters. Though younger, the captain must have had to pay the same dues as the sergeant—perhaps even more, to rise to the higher rank.

Yet Davenport maintains an eerie emotional distance throughout (which is underscored by Brown's rather affectless performance; he

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is so cool that he practically freezes into rigidity). Perhaps Fuller thereby meant to comment on the captain's notion of soldierly conduct, which causes him to be almost color-blind. Indeed, early in the play, Davenport rebuffs Wilkie's presumption of racial familiarity ("You all we got down here," the private claims).

But this sort of irony seems absent elsewhere, particularly from the author's decision to set the play so far in the past. (I do not think the drama required the segregated army, which came to an end after the war; in fact, the play might have been more pointed had it been set after integration. As for the war itself, it could as easily have been Korea or Vietnam—or no war at all, for all the difference it makes to the action.) Did Fuller believe that the attitudes represented by, say, Memphis and Waters would seem outdated today? That Davenport, too, would seem anachronistic, or even Peterson insufficiently militant? Or did he think (or does he recognize) that setting *A Soldier's Play* in 1944 somehow lets all of us—playwright, cast, audience—off the hook? Or was it that he wanted all concerned to consider the drama as art rather than as "relevant" social comment? It is not that I suspect Fuller's motives—it is just that I don't know what they are.

It is impossible to doubt Athol Fugard's motives; for years the South African playwright has been dramatizing with unmistakable sincerity the awful cost of apartheid in human terms. His latest play, *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys*, continues his battle, through his art, against official prejudice in his homeland; like his previous works, it has been generously praised. Yet I suspect that once again he is being lauded more for his intentions than for his achievements.

Like *A Soldier's Play, "Master Harold"* is set in the past, though not in the American South but in the South African city of Port Elizabeth. It is 1950, two years after the triumph of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party and the institutionalization of apartheid. Two black men, Sam (Zakes Mokae) and Willie (Danny Glover) are readying the St. George's Park Tea Room for business. The establishment is much shabbier than its genteel name would suggest; Jane Clark's sparse but suggestive set is practically the Platonic idea of a seedy diner, with a juke box in the corner, a chalkboard menu and an ad for Coke ("The Friendly Pause") on the wall, a grease-covered vent over the exhaust fan near the ceiling, and an aluminum garbage can behind the counter.

Yet the two workers seem to be taking inordinate pride in their surroundings and care in their work. Both men are outfitted in white shirts and black bow ties and pants; Willie wears the apron of a counterman, Sam the brass-buttoned white jacket of a maître d'hôtel. While Willie painstakingly scrubs the floor, carefully kneeling on a folded piece of cardboard and tucking his apron between his legs, Sam meticulously arranges the tables and the red leather-

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ette chairs. All the while, they earnestly discuss the upcoming New Brighton ballroom dancing contest, in which both are competitors. They even take time out from their labors to practice their footwork. Willie is as awkward as Sam is graceful, and accepts the latter's advice regarding his problems with the quickstep and with his partner (romantic and terpsichorean), an unseen woman named Hilda.

Their talk is interrupted by the arrival of the son of the owners of the establishment—15-year-old Harold (Lonny Price), whom Willie solemnly addresses as "Master Harold" and Sam affectionately calls "Hally." Trapped in the tea room by a rainstorm and uninterrupted by customers, the three spend the remainder of the afternoon and the play in the sort of earnest conversation that is as rarely heard in real life as it is frequently overheard in the theater.

Willie mostly remains silent while Hally and Sam are led by the boy's homework into a discussion of great men and history. Though his heart seems to be in the right place ("There's something called progress"), Hally's mind seems to be filled with the all-too-recognizable dogmatic pretensions of zealous adolescent rationalism. "You know perfectly well I'm an atheist," he reminds Sam, who dares to nominate Jesus as a significant historical figure. Hally likewise dismisses Shakespeare: "They ought to do what they did with the Bible—bring the language up to date."

When Sam mentions Lincoln, Hally quickly notes: "You were never a slave. And we freed the slaves long before America did." And the mention of Tolstoy prompts a further reminder: "Tolstoy may have educated his peasants, but I have educated you." It appears that the time "Master Harold" has been spending with "the boys" over the years has been devoted in part to Sam's education. And as the afternoon wears on, Hally and Sam remember, in different ways, their shared past.

But the present rudely reasserts itself in a phone call from Hally's mother, who tells him that his father—a crippled, drunken lout who has been in the hospital—may be returning home. This prospect plunges Hally into juvenile despair: "Anyone who thinks there's nothing wrong in this world ought to have his head examined," he proclaims. Sam tries to offer some consolation by evoking the pleasures of dancing. "It's like being in a world where accidents don't happen," he says. "It's beautiful because that's how we want life to be like." But Hally is skeptical; in real life, he says, "None of us knows the steps, and there's no music playing. Open the newspaper, and what do you see? America bumping into Russia." So we must "learn to dance life like champions instead of beginners," Sam counters, inspiring Hally to this insight: "That's what the U.N. boils down to—a dancing school for politicians." He is even moved to consider writing a term paper entitled "A World Without Collisions: Global Politics on the Dance Floor."

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But his enthusiasm is squelched by another phone call from his mother, who announces that his father has indeed been released. The news throws Hally into a rage. "So much for a bloody world without collisions. . . . That's what all our talk about a decent world is—bullshit. You know what's wrong with your world of dancers? You left out the cripples. Nobody knows the steps, there's no music, and the cripples are out there tripping up everybody." Sam urges him to reconsider his words: "It's your father you're talking about. It's terrible for a son to make jokes like that." But Hally, hurt and defensive, retorts: "What goes on between me and my father is none of your business. He's a white man, and that's good enough for you."

Carried away by the passion of the moment, the boy is driven to confront Sam belligerently: "Why don't you call me 'Master Harold' like Willie? Think of it as a lesson in respect." Finally, in what is meant to be the shocking turning point of the drama, Hally repeats an ugly racist joke that was told him by his father, and then spits in Sam's face. "Now you have done it, Master Harold," Sam says. "Yes, I'll start calling you that from now on. . . . You have hurt yourself, Master Harold. I warned you. I saw it coming . . . The face you should spit on is your father's. . . . You're ashamed of so much, and now you include yourself."

In a pained denouement, Sam gently reveals himself to be his master's teacher as well as his pupil. "Long ago I was going to try and do something, but I've failed," he says mournfully. "How do I wash off your's and your father's guilt?" Then Sam admits that he, too, still has a lot to learn. "I have no right in telling you what a man is if I don't behave like one myself. . . . It would mean nothing was learned in here this afternoon, and there was a hell of a lot of teaching going on in here. . . . Shall we try again?"

The plaintiveness of Sam's final question was no doubt meant by Fugard to express a bitter hopefulness. Yet in the light of the intervening thirty-two years—during which time Hally would have grown into middle age and Sam and Willie into old age, while apartheid continues unchecked—it seems simply embarrassing, particularly coming after endless windy dialogue, artificially arranged in the dramatically tiresome pattern of reminiscence leading to revelation and then recrimination. Once again, as in *A Lesson from Aloes*, Fugard's eye is cast backwards, but this time in what seems like a painfully personal direction. Awkward in its revelations yet unsparing in its recriminations, *"Master Harold"* seems like the author's attempt at atonement; the suspicion is inescapable that the middle-aged Fugard was the young Master Harold. Sad to say, however, this autobiographical feeling (even if it is not the literal truth) does not redeem the play.

The feeble dramatic structure is not the worst problem, although those well-timed phone calls and the fortuitous cooperation of Mother Nature are rather hard to accept. (Wouldn't rain be as like-

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ly to drive people into the Tea Room as away from it?) Language and characterization present even greater difficulties for Fugard. In what are meant to be the play's lyrical passages, for instance, Hally remembers himself, at age ten, flying a kite with Sam in the local park. "There was something alive behind me, tugging at me as if it wanted to be free. . . . It was the most splendid thing I'd ever seen." When the kite finally ran out of wind, it lay on the ground like "something that had lost its soul." Later, Sam tells Hally why he made the kite: "So you could look up to something, be proud of yourself." But he explains something else about that incident that had always puzzled Hally: "I couldn't sit there with you—it was a whites-only bench. And if you're not careful, Master Harold, you'll be sitting there by yourself for a long time, and there won't be a kite in the sky."

Consider that clunky metaphor of the free-flying kite, representing the lost innocence of youth. Does anyone ever talk or think like that—in real life or in real art? And regard the characters out of whose mouths such implausible words flow. Even if we accept that a ten-year-old in a racist society wouldn't recognize the fact of segregation, it is a little hard to believe that a fifteen-year-old would so conveniently blur his childhood memories and thus require the prompting of his black friend.

To make matters worse, Hally, the tormented adolescent, is such a mess from the very beginning of the play that his confusion about his resentment of his father and his unacknowledged and unwilling racism seems more like individual than social pathology. It is unclear how apartheid has anything to do with his growing pains, other than to provide him a dramatically convenient outlet for his ill-understood frustrations—which any institution in any society, good, bad, or indifferent, could do as well.

Sam, by contrast, is simply too good to be true. For years, with his indulgence, Hally has believed himself to be the teacher; only under the most extreme provocation does Sam reveal the lessons that really have been learned, as well as those yet to be mastered. Even then, he pleads for reconciliation—not out of any sense of pragmatism, but as a result of an almost otherworldly dignity. Has any man—black, white, or whatever color—ever been as noble and understanding as Sam? I suspect that Mokae's prize-winning performance is more revealing of how whites wish blacks were than how they (or any other people) actually are.

At the same time, Willie seems like an atavism. No, he doesn't have natural rhythm, at least not at the beginning of the play (when Sam has to tell him to relax), though by the end he seems to be quickstepping with some grace. But otherwise Willie is the South African counterpart to Fuller's C. J. Memphis. Slow-witted, slow to anger, quick to pick his nose, fearful of authority (whether white or black)—Willie, like Sam, lapses into caricature.

All of this could be forgiven if Fugard had written the play with

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some sense of irony. But even though we are meant to laugh at Hally's notion of writing about "Ballroom Dancing as a Political Vision," what Fugard leaves us with at the end is the image of . . . ballroom dancing as a political vision. "Let's dance," Willie says to Sam after Hally has left in tears. "You lead, I follow." And as the lights dim, the two men waltz around the stage.

I wish I could take *"Master Harold"* as seriously as Fugard intended it (or as seriously as other critics have), but it seems to me little more than a well-intended but awkwardly written and sentimental rites-of-passage play. It is a far less impressive drama than *A Soldier's Play*, which is itself not a totally satisfying work of art. I regrettably suspect that both have been indulged far more than they deserve, for the mere fact of their subject matter. To be sure, at a time when the problem of race relations is fading from the public consciousness, it takes some courage to confront it at all on stage. But though they are worth something, good intentions are not enough.

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VERNON YOUNG

Film Chronicle: Personal Best, Three Levels

NOT BY DESIGN but by holy accident I had been rereading André Malraux shortly before seeing *Personal Best.*

> The glory of the victors crowned with leaves of the sacred wild olive was an aspect of the poetic romanticism which then pervaded Greece. . . . As hymned by Pindar, the victors participated, if obscurely, in the nature of heroes; the Games played the same part in the world of the Divine as great religious festivals played in that of the sacred.

Never have I seen a movie ostensibly devoted to a tradition sanctified by its appearance two thousand years ago which had in it so little extension of the ideal. If the noble effusions of *Chariots of Fire* were somewhat stilted, they at least suggested larger dimensions than the self-centered and plebeian will-to-win and you-can-drop-dead that governs the tone of *Personal Best.* Never have I seen a film so potentially sensuous (girls training for the Olympic Trials of 1980) so blankly un-sensuous in the event. Neither in its conception nor in its particulars is there a moment of beauty or tenderness in this script; or, for that matter, civility or fellowship: only vindictive competition, macho assumptions, and gutter language. According to my program data, some of "America's finest athletes" are numbered among the supporting players; when they're not o'erleaping hurdles they are drinking beer out of cans, stuffing McDonald's junk-food into their mouths and telling someone—anyone—to go copulate with himself. Never, certainly, have I seen in one place so many ugly female bodies; if I were not too old to be curable, this movie would turn me off women for the rest of my days! Patrice Donnelly, playing Tory Skinner, the enterprising dyke, is the only actress with a spark of personality, but since she is required to spend so much of her time sucking a pop-bottle or expressing more than her share of the slob dialogue, her attractions are considerably diminished.

All the advance hype about girls discovering themselves through their bodies is nothing but leeway for Michael Chapman to photograph (with little inspiration from his subjects, I'll grant) lumpy young Amazons in the sweaty nude. No wild olive leaves in *their* hair! A reasonably articulate publicist who wrote "A Few Words About the Film" for the credit sheets I received interprets the ath-

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letic rivalry of Chris and Tory, who are lovers, by asking a nice rhetorical question: "Male or female, how do you compete with a body you have already surrendered to your opponent?"—which is much more subtle in its formulation than the butch relationship depicted by Robert Towne (he wrote, produced and directed the script). Towne obviously believed he was doing something wicked and way-out by portraying an inter-female love affair. In which case I'd say he hadn't done his homework. Anyone expecting from this film an insight into either the practice or the mystique of those whom the Russians call "warm sisters" will be a sadly disappointed voyeur.

Freud once accounted for the generic actor by suggesting that early on he was mortally afraid of exhibiting his body and hence overcompensated with a career of exhibitionism, risking punishment but often, instead, receiving applause. Most of our movie directors have been busy, for twenty years now, proving that they share the actor's syndrome. *Their* compulsion to expose themselves is reflected in their insistence upon exposing others: the actors and actresses whom they submit to gratuitous ceremonies of the bedroom and bathroom (preferably not *in* the bedroom or bathroom)—in order to quell the lurking doubt that they are not fully enrolled in the democracy of smut without repeated evidence of their familiarity with diverse bodily functions. Almost any current movie will illustrate what I'm talking about but I thought it especially notable that Franceso Rosi (the Earnest Mellowed Communist) was unable to resist the gambit. In *Three Brothers*, an otherwise high-minded, if altogether tedious scenario of political debate in the shadow of the universals (Nature, Old Age and Death), Rosi contrives to photograph an eight-year-old girl trying to find a concealed area on a busy highway in which to pee, with the camera moving up for a close shot of the puddle! The event, it goes without saying, has nothing to do with anything else in the movie. What untiring sniggers must go through the mind of a man as he shoots this scene (imagine the number of takes it may have demanded!), then views it again and again and again, through rushes, editing, scoring and the final montage!

Uomini sul fondo. Männen am boden. If I were a pugnacious feminist, I'd be prepared to describe *Das Boot* as That Filthy Male-Animal Movie, with no concession made to the peril of submarine warfare it vividly recaptures. (Germany's peril as much as ours.) I should not have supposed that the phallic form of a submarine (to say nothing of its auxiliary organ, the torpedo) was indiscernible, even to the pure in heart; yet, in *Das Boot*, when the Captain is explaining what a tight fit it will be for U-96 to sneak through the Straits of Gibraltar, we are treated, by way of crunching analogy, to one of the oldest dirty jokes on foc'sle record. Wolfgang Petersen, directing from his own script, seems heavily determined to remind us that battles are waged and wars won (or lost) by the heroic rank-

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and-file who, in person, are brute conformists of the cloacal word, enemies of the mind, maudlin when drunk, obtuse when sober. Two lines of dialogue would have been sufficient reminder. Petersen takes no chances. He opens on a café brawl, the night before the "gray wolves" leave to prowl the Atlantic, which could have been directed by the script girl (or by you, dear reader) with closed eyes—there are so many predecessors! Incidentally I doubt that officers and crew of the German High Command would have fraternized in a waterfront dive and I'd need to have documentary evidence further to convince me that a submarine commander would have taunted an SS observer with Hitler's improvident war aims by encouraging his men to sing, in English, *Tipperary*!

Beyond this, it's an impressive ordeal. Petersen puts you suffocatingly inside that sub, with stereophonic sound and a camera that itself moves with the velocity of a torpedo from fore to aft when battle stations are sounded. He puts you outside, too, when his grim sentinel rises from the deep, cleaving the bosom of the destructive element, or plunges out of sight like an amphibious mole when enemy craft are sighted. Probably the most devastating sequences are those when U-96 scores on an Allied convoy and is pursued by a destroyer that drops depth charges; the framed shot shudders convulsively as if the camera were undergoing a giant orgasm. (It's the company I keep!)

As exciting as it was whenever the men were too endangered to indulge their resources for genitalic metaphor, it would have been even more believable if all the actors except Jurgen Prochnow (Captain) had not been so terribly bad. Prochnow is sovereign because he never *acts* (he has the same kind of power-on-a-leash that distinguished the late Robert Shaw); the others do nothing else, which is of course the fault of the director. Petersen is destined for Hollywood: master of effects and no gift for subordination. I'll not begrudge the effects, they approach poetry: when, memorably, the U-96 surfaces into a sad, puce and pitching world of sinister daylight, or on to a breathless moon-flecked expanse of undulating velvet or, the most terrifying of all, like a glimpse of our last night on Earth: the silent crew surveying the hell they have made of the convoy—smoldering hulks, and flames from oil quietly licking the night-bound waters.

Mephisto. In a moment of voluntary confession, the actor, Hendrik Hofgen, recalls a shameful put-down from his choirboy days; wanting to sound like an angel, he sang an octave higher than the others. With more pity than reproof, the choirmaster told him softly and from a great height, "Just keep quiet, will you?" Since that time, Hofgen, on the shabby fringes of politics and theater, had persistently striven to call attention to himself. At the peak of his success in so doing, during the inceptive years of the Third Reich, the General, through whose influence chiefly he has attained favor

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and applause, recapitulates the early shock by telling the favored Hofgen, when he least expects it, "*Just keep quiet.*" The duplicity of the actor with no character of his own—almost a condition of his art—is thus united with the compulsion to reenact exposure and humiliation—and both are nourished by a political contingency, the infamous hour of Hitler's National Socialism. The consequences are in this context beautifully unresolved. The General and his aides escort Hofgen at night to the Olympics arena under construction, push him into the center of the dark emptiness, where no applauding crowds have yet been heard and, while the General mockingly bellows Hofgen's name into the night to hear if it will arouse an echo, blinding spotlights transfix the bewildered "Mephisto." "Why are they doing this? What do they want of me?" he asks himself piteously. "I'm only an actor."

Unlike Hofgen, his prototype was not left suspended in any such equivocation; life, blunter than art, knew what it wanted of him. Bear with me . . . The year is 1935. Gustaf Grundgens, then barely in his own thirties, achieved a tour de force in *The Making of a King*, one of many Frederick the Great films produced under Goebbels to illustrate the historical necessity for approving Hitler. This was done by restating the substantially accurate evolution of Frederick's political realism: from active conspiracy to worldly acceptance of his personal role in the destiny of Prussia. At the end of this film, the face of Grundgens as Frederick (powdered wig, long eyelashes, clean-shaven of course) becomes, through inner concentration and empathy of the actor (no editing tricks), and drawn as if by a magnet into one of the lengthiest closeups ever, the embodied face of Adolf Hitler! The gleaming eyes were unmistakable! . . . I saw this film in 1955[1] and it was as hair-raising then as it must have been in Germany (if for different reasons) twenty years earlier: an infernal triumph, unique in the history of cinema. Grundgens was the brother-in-law of Klaus Mann who, in Holland (1936) wrote the novel, *Mephisto*, predicated on the type of self-seeking opportunist represented by Grundgens but not a literal portrait of this actor. Nonetheless, Mann came so close to the program of Grundgens' career that even after the war, German publishers refused to reprint the novel, for by then Grundgens was director of the State theatre in Hamburg and the most celebrated actor in Germany. (I saw him on stage in the early sixties; another generation was sympathetically applauding his Mephistopheles!) That Klaus Mann's suicide in 1948 was inspired by the suppression of his book is generally acknowledged. Another attempt at publication in 1963, after Grundgens'

[1] At Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y. If this was among the many films that perished in a fire a few years ago, I don't know where another print would exist outside of Wiesbaden. Like many Third Reich films, *The Making of A King* remains, as far as I know, *verboten* for public showing in Germany.

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death, was frustrated by the firm protest of the actor's adopted son. An English translation appeared in 1977 and if I understand the sequel correctly a German paperback company defied the court injunctions and published *Mephisto* in 1980, whereupon Istvan Szabo prepared his film version in Hungary with dominantly German actors.

I was unable to get my hands on the book before writing this review: which may be just as well, for I don't think one should be intimidated by the particulars of an original text. Either a scenario works *as a film* or it does not. The introductory scenes of Szabo's version don't work, or rather they are overworked; his exposition is a mess. That kitsch operetta in which Dora Martin is stunning the Hamburg audience while Hofgen, in his dressing-room, is tearing his hair, goes on far too long and the following session—Hofgen with his mulatto mistress and dance teacher—is even more of a drag; exploiting Klaus Maria Brandauer's ability to do almost anything theatrical, it seems primarily set up as a sex titillation. I gather, from one critique of the novel I've read, that Mann's inclusion of the relationship was overstressed for the same purpose. Fragmentary scenes thereafter summarize almost too neatly Hofgen's diffuse radicalism, his phony theories of "total theatre," his prompt power over women who can be useful to him: the whole muddled climate in which Bohemians espousing the working class were likely to be Hitler Jugend leaders. All this is indispensable preface to the ensuing tragedy. I simply felt that much of it was over-compressed as a lineup to what followed.

Once Szabo gets into the full swing of Hofgen's rise to national adulation, his editing is more adroit and his dialogue (with Peter Dobai's assistance) suits the word to the action. Brandauer is phenomenal. While he never does anything as quietly sensational as being Hitler from the inside, he does a hundred brilliant things and does them so deftly that they seem easy to do. By turns, he is deferential, suave, self-mocking, seductive and hysterical; his Hofgen sheds real tears for himself; he even sheds some for the victims he is powerless to rescue. The summit of his eloquence is on stage as Mephisto or when, for instance, he is explaining with outrageous plausibility his interpretation of Hamlet as a latent National Socialist. If I were instructing actors, I'd tell them to note Brandauer's relaxed shoulders and to watch his hands, which always return to a kind of C Minor, behind his back or clasped protectively in front, fig-leaf fashion. The gesture is the man. There are many fine actors in this vale of tears, yet I strain to recall a recent *multi-level* performance to rival this one. (Per Oscarsson's, perhaps, as Strindberg in a film never shown here, *Inferno*, centered on the Swedish writer's demented year in Paris.)

Rolf Hoppe as the General is scarcely less accomplished within a more restricted channel. His languor at a desk or on a sofa, his bri-

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dled glance as he samples his drink, belie the ruthlessness with which this air of opulence vanishes upon a syllable to be replaced by an arid commandment to which there is no appeal. The pursed feminine mouth coarsens into a one-sided animal snarl; the softly-smiling words of admiration or forbearance are succeeded by an order as final as the next voice you may hear, that of the firing-squad. "How *could* you, Hofgen? *Get rid of her*!" And is there not something effectively sinister in the way that this large, comfortable man can forsake his benign and stately walk—as he arrives at the final reception, for example—and step out, never looking back, with incredible speed of locomotion, when he is about some business that has malice in it? Field-Marshal Goering could have used Rolf Hoppe's personal best.

Afterword: I have read Klaus Mann's novel since writing this review, and my respect for the inventiveness of the Hungarian adaptation has risen threefold. The novel is appallingly bad, beyond its conception, written with unshaded contempt for all the characters, with no margin for the reader to remain uncertain or to elicit his own conclusions. Hofgen, for one, is depicted by Mann with such unsparing malice that you can only wonder at his alleged powers of persuasion, either with women or with chancellors of the Reich! The use of the Olympics Stadium, by the way, for Hofgen's crucial isolation at the end, was not Mann's doing; it was a stroke of original artistry on the part of Istvan Szabo or his collaborator.

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Reviews

MONROE K. SPEARS

A Little Man Who Was a Writer

Hic Jacet Homunculus Scriptor was the epitaph Henry Adams composed for himself, and Russell Fraser suggests that it applies equally well to Blackmur, who identified himself with Adams so closely that he was never able to finish the book about him that he worked on all his life and intended as his major work. That Blackmur was a genuine writer—major critic and minor poet—is hardly open to dispute; that he was a small man, physically and psychically, this book[1] provides abundant evidence. (He was not petty, and *small-minded* seems too severe; but no one could call him magnanimous.) More successfully than most literary biographers, Mr. Fraser reveals how the writing was related to the man's limited capacities, how the same pressures that left him emotionally stunted and distorted also drove him to write. Mr. Fraser never reduces him to a case history and wisely avoids diagnostic jargon (he will go only so far as to remark that his "handwriting was stingy—the Freudians would say it was anal"). After reading this book, a Freudian would say a lot more than that: Blackmur was a classic and extreme example of the anal type of severe neurotic, compulsive-retentive-obsessive-defensive-sadistic in character; without the sublimation he found in writing, he would probably have been a hopeless neurotic, unable to function at all. All the typical elements are there: a weak father for whom Blackmur felt only contempt and hatred; an overwhelming mother who lavished upon him all the love she had ceased to feel for her husband, self-sacrificial and grasping for affection. His relation to his mother was close indeed: he lived with her until he was twenty-six and thereafter wrote her every day. Fraser considers the possibility that he was a latent, and even briefly overt, homosexual; but sensibly does not make much of it. As psychiatrists used to say, his libido was turned inward; Fraser confines himself to metaphors about Narcissus. But it is no wonder that his relations with women were difficult and unsatisfactory.

These psychological generalizations are less interesting than the unique circumstances and specific details upon which they are based, and it is richness of sharp detail (often gathered from inter-

[1] A MINGLED YARN: The Life of R. P. Blackmur, by *Russell Fraser*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $19.95.

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views and unpublished letters) that distinguishes Mr. Fraser's book. A few examples will have to suffice. Blackmur, as presumably everyone still remembers, was a high school dropout who became a full professor at Princeton and a revered and immensely powerful figure on the literary scene. What I had not known until I read this book was the full story of the private agonies and the constant conviction of failure that accompanied this external success. To be the child of a loveless marriage and the victim of an overcompensating mother who kept him at home for what should have been the first three years of school; to contend with near poverty, unhelped by a remote and ineffectual father who did not even try to work, while the mother supported the family by running a boarding house; to associate constantly with Harvard students in the boarding house and in the bookstores where he chiefly worked, while always aware that he had neither the money nor the academic qualifications to attend Harvard—all this would make anyone a little peculiar, and it sounds as gloomy as a Russian novel. As Fraser tells it, however, it is entertaining and often funny as well as sad.

Aside from his mother, his first and only real love appears to have been Tessa Gilbert, an appetizing beauty: "She had heard that Cleopatra washed her hair in myrrh and frankincense—a potent aphrodisiac, according to her sources. Myrrh and frankincense were not to be had, so she washed her hair in cinnamon and nutmeg. The trouble was it made her smell like apple pie." Tessa was always eating chocolates if she wasn't eating ice cream; she "lived in her body and rejoiced in the world. The body was Richard's torment, and he defined the alienated man"; he looked like "someone who hadn't had enough to eat from the time he was a baby." These polar opposites went together for three years; then she finally refused to marry him. On the rebound (though, given Blackmur's temperament, it was a long and slow rebound, taking four years) he married Helen Dickson, "totally the wrong wife for him." Helen was a painter, competent, practical, and humorless. " 'Why are you always laughing?' she asked Tessa reproachfully. Helen had a baleful look like the girl in the fairy tale, Jack Wheelwright used to say. 'When she opened her mouth, toads fell out.' " Richard, thinking as always in literary terms, found that Tessa, his Molly Bloom (somehow also Maud Gonne), wouldn't say Yes and that Helen, his Georgie Yeats, unveiled no visions with her psychic powers but only a trace of poltergeists. The marriage was marked by "quiet sadness and resignation," and the pattern of Richard's early years—"the woman who toiled and the stay-at-home husband"—was repeated as Helen supported them (by painting murals for the WPA and teaching ballroom dancing at night) while Richard stayed at home and wrote. The marriage rapidly went bad, Helen complaining "to anyone within earshot how Richard wouldn't sleep with her." Helen had affairs, but continued to live with Richard, even after they were di-

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vorced in 1951; being around the two of them was "like an Ingmar Bergman film." Whatever Richard's sexual peculiarities—his friends said that his attachment to his mother "led him to repress his sexual desires except perhaps once a year, when they would explode in a sadistic fashion"; he "was tense with women as they confronted him with a sexual possibility," and one such said that dancing with him was "like dancing with a steel cable of the Brooklyn Bridge," the tension dropping only when a woman was safely married to a friend—the more important and even sadder fact is that he was contemptuous of women and cruel to them in the presence of others, while at the same time he needed them. "What he couldn't dispense with, he couldn't abide"; and he treated the women to whom he formed attachments in his later years very badly indeed.

Though Mr. Fraser tries to be fair and realistic, he does exhibit some notable biases. His description of Princeton, and particularly its English department, is wholly from Blackmur's point of view. Since I knew most of the people involved (though from a graduate student, or worm's eye, perspective; I left with my Ph.D. just before Blackmur arrived), I feel obliged to protest that they were not the dim pedants or shifty rascals they appear as in this book. The most distorted portrait is that of Allen Tate, who brought Blackmur to Princeton as his assistant, and was supplanted by the cuckoo he introduced into the nest. Tate was no politician: I heard him deliver "A Rose for Emily," which accused traditional scholars of trying to preserve literature as a decaying corpse, to the English Club; there was no discussion; everyone tiptoed out as at a funeral. But Tate was certainly not the bigot and malicious gossip he appears as here. (Fraser's "evidence" for the first epithet is a letter of 1933; for the second, the word of a close friend of Blackmur who later studied with Tate.)

Mr. Fraser seems to have interviewed Tate just once, when Tate was seventy-eight; from this interview he takes Tate's generous assertion that Blackmur was "our best American critic" and repeats it as if it were an authoritative statement of consensus, while dismissing everything else Tate said as malicious gossip. Now, what concerns me is not the question of whether or not in fact Blackmur deliberately sabotaged Tate at Princeton in order to get his job. What matters is that Mr. Fraser throughout the book systematically denigrates Tate as person, teacher, and critic. This may be quite unconscious, a consequence of the natural impulse to exalt Blackmur. But it seems to me to lead to serious distortion and falsification in terms both of biography and of literary history.

Mr. Fraser begins by calling Blackmur "a great man," though he soon qualifies this by calling him an "equivocal hero" and professing his willingness to bear witness to "the hokum that went with the greatness." To his friends and students at Princeton "he came to represent a hero of our time." But the book reveals Blackmur as

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small in every sense, a canny and parsimonious Scot obsessed with getting ahead and gaining security, shifty in money matters and getting maximum mileage from everything he produced (republishing the same essays over and over, for instance). There were stories of his "unscrupulousness and dirty academic politics"; he wasn't above "using brass knuckles when he had to, or sacrificing a friend to save himself"; he displayed an "excess of charity" toward those in the seats of power. Lincoln Kirstein spoke of the "hideous overcompensating" for his early poverty that marked the later years, called him "a joyless man, incapable of pleasure, a sexually bedeviled man who didn't like his own body"; he "attacked literature as if it were a piece of property and he played with the property, oblivious of what it stood for." When he gave literary advice, he was paid for it. He was shifty about money matters, not conscientious about returning advances, fulfilling contracts, reading MSS. Worst of all, he was something of a fake and charlatan, pretending to knowledge—especially of languages—that he didn't really have. Mr. Fraser concedes this and seems to recognize its importance: "He understood how different language traditions entailed different perceptions of reality. This meant that translation entailed falsification. So the word was sacrosanct. All of New Criticism reduces to these formulations. Understanding so much, he let his criticism depend on translation." The mistakes, he says, "weren't decisive. But by not reading his authors in the original, he forfeited linguistic purity, and that was decisive." In his later years he made circular puns in Latin, and "got the Latin wrong. He ran on about writers he hardly knew—like Novalis"; he took advances for books on seminal thinkers and never began writing them; his "style grew prolix, and sickly shining like the paintings of Douanier Rousseau." Every year he proposed to the English department that all freshmen be required to take a year's course in the novels of Trollope. He opposed inviting Faulkner to Princeton.

Allen Tate, in contrast, though physically not large (except for the head), and certainly not without his faults, was large-minded, generous and open-handed. From his earliest years he displayed a high-minded concern for the republic of letters that transcended his own interests, and he was prodigal of literary advice and help to hundreds—perhaps thousands—of aspiring writers. From his fellow Fugitives (especially Ransom, Warren, Brooks, Davidson) to Hart Crane and Jonathan Bishop through Lowell (who literally camped in his front yard all summer) and Berryman, through succeeding generations down to the latest beginners, poets (and critics and fiction writers, too) found in him a warm and sympathetic friend who understood each new work instantly, saw what was good and what not so good about it, and was prepared to offer practical help through writing prefaces, recommendations, or doing whatever was needed. Tate's enormous correspondence, as it gradually appears, and Robert Buffington's biography, which must now be nearing

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completion, will show him to be the great master of this kind of unpaid practical criticism (which must be larger in bulk than his published criticism). His only rival, to my knowledge, is the early Ezra Pound; Tate never did anything quite so spectacular as Pound's revision of *The Waste Land*; but he might well have been capable of it had opportunity offered.

Tate behaved toward Blackmur with his usual generosity, offering him praise and encouragement both in letters and in published reviews, for both his poetry and his criticism, recommending him for fellowships, and getting him the job at Princeton. His suspicion that Blackmur had knifed him in the back at Princeton made no difference to his attitude toward Blackmur's work: he published it in *The Sewanee Review* and promoted and praised it at every opportunity. I mention all this not to criticize Blackmur for not being Tate, but to correct the prejudice against Tate that appears frequently in *The Mingled Yarn*. Fraser cannot even allow a student who took classes with both Tate and Blackmur at Princeton to say that he "much preferred Tate, . . . missing in Richard 'a unified and powerful critical methodology' " without adding the undercutting comment, "This will be matter for praise or blame, depending on how you value the importance of a unified methodology."

Fraser's attitude toward the New Criticism seems ambivalent and confused. He quotes Tate's statement (made orally, at a symposium) that Blackmur "probably invented what we call the New Criticism in the United States," describes Tate as Blackmur's "fellow New Critic," and says Tate and Blackmur created the New Criticism between them. At the same time he calls Tate the "least New Critical among the New Critics" because all his life he "was bemused by ideas," and he notes that Blackmur as early as 1941 renounced New Criticism: "The New Critical mode, his one greatest achievement, showed as illusory now. 'It is plain,' he wrote, 'that we never do in fact understand literature solely by literary means.' " But no early New Critic ever asserted that we did (except possibly in a moment of polemical excess); Eliot and Tate were always at particular pains to make this clear. Fraser seems bemused by the myth of New Criticism as a coherent school, with its emblem a critic in a vacuum, peering myopically at an equally isolated poem. Even Blackmur's famous dictionary, with him from the first, spoils the purity of that picture; the outside world was never banished, only put temporarily in the background. In his genealogy of the New Criticism (a term, by the way, that I would abolish if I could) Fraser does not even mention Eliot and I. A. Richards, and this seems significant: they were the strongest immediate influences on the fledgeling New Critics, and they both were obviously involved with the world outside literature.

Blackmur was, Fraser makes clear, a complete sceptic, unable to believe in anything beyond the value of art; in his unpublished fiction and journals Wilde and Pater are prominent, and Fraser terms him "the strayed reveler out of the Mauve Decade." Art was his reli-

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gion, and he tries to make of it a "rival creation" which will "alter that actual life." In this notion that language creates another world he parts company with Eliot and Tate; and in conceiving of the critic as prophet or sage or artist or priest of art—as he does increasingly in his later essays—he diverges even farther. In their pretentiousness, self-indulgence, and pseudo-wisdom, these later pieces were often embarrassing to admirers of his earlier work.

Resistance to Fraser's attempts to attach the label of "our best American critic" to Blackmur should not make us lose sight of the fact that Blackmur at his best was a magnificent critic. The early pieces on Cummings, Stevens, Pound, Eliot, Yeats, James; some of the writing on Adams and on the nature of criticism; parts of *Anni Mirabiles* and other late pieces like "Lord Tennyson's Scissors" and "Between the Numen and the Moha"—these are still alive and permanently valuable. But there are many American critics who seem to me obviously superior. Allen Tate, for one (as I have already hinted), and Lionel Trilling and Cleanth Brooks, in their very different ways—all these are clearer and better writers, far more penetrating in dealing with ideas, and more reliable and stimulating in the interpretation of particular works. (And there is, of course, Eliot, who began it all, and continued to think of himself as an American critic in spite of his expatriation.)

As Fraser's Shakespearean title suggests—"The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together"—everything about Blackmur is mixed and double. At his best a wonderfully suggestive critic who could make the reader understand and feel how language works in poetry perhaps better than anyone else, at his worst he was ignorant and pretentious, relying on complacent ironies and incantatory formulas. The yarn of his life, too, was more mingled than that of most writers. He was so clearly an emotional cripple who *had* to write that we are thrown back into meditations on the relation between psychic damage and compensating gifts, the wound and the bow. To my knowledge nobody has formulated the relation satisfactorily—certainly not Freud or Trilling or Edmund Wilson—but its existence cannot be doubted. ("I wonder what hurt him into writing?" a novelist once asked me about another; certainly that way of putting it applies to Blackmur.) Fraser handles this well, without oversimplifying or pontificating; as always, though, it is easier to see the connection between the writer's horrendous early life and his limitations than between these circumstances and his peculiar gifts. Naturally enough, Fraser's writing is somewhat gnomic and involuted—what other style could a disciple of Blackmur possibly have?—but fortunately more open-textured, informal, and humorous. Like Blackmur, though, Fraser often mingles his yarn compulsively, making style a defense and refuge; every statement is followed by a qualifying one which, though often witty, comes to seem both predictable and evasive. "Elevating the status of language, he hid the

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world as immediately experienced by an ersatz world of his own devising. Or you can say that he made this world golden." "He wasn't a charlatan, but his critics weren't wholly off the mark."

Fraser, who was a much younger colleague and friend of Blackmur's during his last nine years at Princeton, seems to try hard to present both sides—so much so, in fact, that it becomes almost a tic, every agent being double, every yarn mingled. Very properly, he makes his portrait of Blackmur as favorable as he can while preserving truth and candor; but it doesn't leave you feeling that you wish you had known him. This book takes a worthy place on the rapidly growing shelf of literary biographies of the forties and fifties; it has none of the intimacy and poignance of Eileen Simpson's *Poets in Their Youth* or the exuberance of Atlas' biography of Delmore Schwartz or Saul Bellow's fictional version. But Blackmur was hardly an exuberant person, and intimacy was not a possibility. Given the limitations of his subject, it seems to me that Fraser manages remarkably well: his book is consistently interesting and entertaining.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

Tales of Waste and Woe

WHAT A LIFE! waiting with bated breath to hear from *The New Yorker*: "I depend too desperately on getting my poems, my little glib poems, so neat, so small, accepted by *The New Yorker*"; "I have not written at all since the Vence story (which will be rejected with *The New Yorker* rejection of my poems, and even as I bravely say so, I hope I am lying, because my love for Richard is in the story, and my wit, a little bit, and I want to have it frozen in print and not rejected: see, how dangerous, I again identify with rejections too much!)"; "jealous of . . . Philip Booth for writing poems for *The New Yorker*"; "*The New Yorker* rejected poems, with a 'sorry, please try again' at least"; "My identity is shaping, forming itself—I feel stories sprout, reading the collection of *New Yorker* stories—yes, I shall, in the fullness of time, be among them—";

> One letter stuck up out of the mailbox, and I saw *The New Yorker* on the left corner in dark print. My eyes dazed over. I raced alternatives through my head: I had sent a stamped envelope with my last poems, so they must have lost it and returned the rejects in "one of their" own envelopes. Or it must be a letter for Ted about copyrights. I ripped the letter from the box. It felt shockingly hopefully thin. I tore it open right there on the steps, over mammoth marshmallow Mrs. Whalen sitting in the green yard with her two pale artificially cute little boys in their swimsuits jumping in and out of the rubber circular portable swimming pool and bouncing a gaudy striped ball. The black thick print of Howard Moss's letter banged into my brain. I saw "MUSSEL HUNTER AT ROCK HARBOR seems to me a marvelous poem and I'm happy to say we're taking it for *The New Yorker*. . . ."—at this realization of ten years of hopeful wishful waits (and subsequent rejections) I ran yipping upstairs to Ted and jumping about like a Mexican bean . . .

—"The author's proofs came from *The New Yorker* yesterday. Three long columns of them in the blessed *New Yorker* print which I've envisioned for so long. My next ambition is to get a story in *The New Yorker*—five, ten more years work"; "Got a rejection of poems I thought a 'sure thing' at *The New Yorker* and haven't had time or energy to brood—or write!"; "My first job to open my real experience like an old wound[!]; then to extend it[!!]; then [her only unforced, unanticipated, and lovely image in pages and pages] to in-

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vent on the drop of a feather, a whole multicolored bird. Study, study one or two *New Yorker*'s"—as if frank and earnest Sylvia Plath[1] studying, studying the very ads for undies in that slickest of slicks imagined she would build up her mental muscles to the size of Howard Moss's or Philip Booth's.

Plath needs a general seal of approval; acceptance even more than acceptances. There's an etiquette in the layout of *The New Yorker* so matriarchally smug that anybody pressed to its bosom would be hard pressed to feel anything but welcomed back to Big Mama and the divine ground, i.e. Plath's "blessed *New Yorker* print" on a page that sandwiches between the pricey boutique fashions at either edge an authoritative column of text which, unattributed to an author till the end of the piece forty pages later, keeps hinting it wouldn't allow itself to be written except by itself, because who (except Jacques Derrida) would dare? Plath wouldn't; *The New Yorker* is her solemn collective waking dream of surcease of the pain of consciousness. Or she toils away the morning after at her sleeping dreams in synopsis to be carried intact to her analyst, most of them as solemn and blatant as though prescribed by her analyst; but two are hilarious enough to seem authentic. One is a dream of betrayal (of Mother and *The New Yorker*): "Mother and Warren [Plath's brother] in puritanical, harsh, snoopy poses. I bit her arm . . . and she was old, thin, ever-watchful. Warren discovering me about to bed with someone whose name was Partisan Review. Old shames and guilts." In the other, Marilyn Monroe (godmother of us all) materializes off the silver screen—where at the time she was in full career—to give consolation and a manicure:

> Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream as a kind of fairy godmother. . . . I spoke, almost in tears, of how much she and Arthur Miller meant to us, although they could, of course, not know us at all. She gave me an expert manicure. I had not washed my hair, and asked her about hairdressers, saying no matter where I went, they always imposed a horrid cut on me. She invited me to visit her during the Christmas holidays, promising a new, flowering life.

Plath took her comfort where she could, but there was never enough of it.

The journals have a second-hand quality, not that she's imitating anybody but that she seldom looks directly at what she's writing about, she writes what she thinks a writer ought to write who will grow up to be worthy of publication in *The New Yorker*: she insists on thinking of herself as nothing if not a writer—"My life is a disci-

[1] THE JOURNALS OF SYLVIA PLATH, ed. by *Frances McCullough* with *Ted Hughes*, Consulting Editor. The Dial Press. $16.95.

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pline, a prison: I live for my own work, without which I am nothing. My writing. [But then she has a guilty afterthought about her loving husband whom she loves and forgot to mention so she drags him in:] Nothing matters but Ted, Ted's writing and my writing"; she writes to persuade herself she's a writer and, till her middle twenties nearly always and even in her last few years much of the time, she writes like a very bad writer, preposterous violent mixed metaphors, grotesquely elaborated metaphors, cliché piled on cliché in depressingly unintended emulation of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*: "use myself to the hilt"; "living to the hilt of our total resources"; "To use a favorite metaphor: It is as if both of us, wary of oysters so rich and potent and at once digestively dangerous as they are, should agree to each swallow an oyster (our prospective mate) tied to a string (our reserve about committing ourselves). Then, if either or both of us found the oyster disagreeing with our respective nervous systems, we could yank up the oyster before it was too late, and completely assimilated in all its destructive potent [sic] (with marriage). Sure, there might be a little nausea, a little regret, but the poisoning, corrosive, final, destructive, would not have had a chance to set in"; or if you don't like oysters you can tie a string to "the dark forces of lust"; "that fury and that death which is loving you"; "would marriage sap my creative energy?"; "life which can be shared in openness, in wind and sunlight, with a fellow human being who believes in the same basic principles"; "my vibrant dynamic self"; "my smoldering passion"; "the compelling mystic aura of a sacred object"; "the accusing, never-satisfied gods who surround me like a crown of thorns"; "How much of life I have known: love, disillusion, madness, hatred, murderous passions"; "feeding a man's insatiable guts" (she means cooking for him); "The self-love I can hide or reweld by the biblical saw of 'losing myself and finding myself.' For instance, I could hold my nose, close my eyes, and jump blindly into the waters of some man's insides, submerging myself until his purpose becomes my purpose, his life, my life, and so on. One fine day I would float to the surface, quite drowned, and supremely happy with my newfound selfless self."

You might think that rewelding with a saw and taking a plunge into a man's peritoneal cavity (those "insatiable guts") would exhaust her supply of pop-eyed fancies, but there are scads more where such came from, as when Plath proposes to "give" some poor guy "this colossal reservoir of faith and love for him to swim in daily, and to give him children; lots of them, in pain and pride" (because "to consummate love by bearing the child of the loved one is far profounder than any orgasm or intellectual rapport"). Once she marries Ted Hughes, Plath the colossal swimming-hole desiccates and metamorphoses without a splash into Plath the colossal husbandizer: "a magnificent handsome brilliant husband (gone are those

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frayed days of partial ego-satisfaction of conquering new slight men who fell easier and easier)"; "the endless deep love I live in"; "the deep rich color of his mind" (e.g. when he advises her to "Get hold of a thing and shove your head into it"); "I am married to a man whom I miraculously love as much as life"; "He uses me—uses all of me so I am lit and glowing with love like a fire, and this is all I looked for all my life . . . "; "I blink every time I see him afresh. This is the man the unsatisfied ladies scan the stories in *The Ladies' Home Journal* for . . . oh, he is unbelievable and the more so because he is my husband." But, but, but "I have been restored for over a year, and still the dreams aren't quite sure of it." And the only account of her husband that doesn't read like writing is the burst of rage when she chances upon him almost in the act of (as she calls it) "two-timing" her with a girl from one of his classes:

> Ted was coming up the road from Paradise Pond, where girls take their boys to neck on weekends. He was walking with a broad [he sure was!], intense smile, eyes into the uplifted doe-eyes of a strange girl with brownish hair, a large lipsticked grin, and bare thick legs in khaki Bermuda shorts. I saw this in several sharp flashes, like blows. I could not tell the color of the girl's eyes, but Ted could, and his smile, though open and engaging as the girl's was, took on an ugliness in context. His stance next to Van Voris clicked into place, his smile became too white-hot, became fatuous, admiration-seeking. He was gesturing, just finishing an observation, an explanation. The girl's eyes souped up giddy applause. She saw me coming. Her eye started to guilt and she began to run, literally, without a goodbye, Ted making no effort to introduce her, as I'm sure Bill would have. She hasn't learned to be deceitful yet in her first look, but she'll learn fast. He thought her name was Sheila; once he thought my name was Shirley: oh, all the twists of the tongue; the smiles. Strange, but jealousy in me turned to disgust. The late comings home, my vision, while brushing my hair, of a black-horned, grinning wolf [?!] all came clear, fused, and I gagged at what I saw. I am no smiler anymore. But Ted is. His esthetic distance from his girls so betrayed by his leaning stance, leaning into the eyes of adoration—not old adoration, but new, fresh, unadulterated. Or, perhaps, adulterated. Van Voris looks white. Lily-handed. Why is it I so despise this brand of male vanity? Even Richard had it, small, sickly as he was at nineteen. Only he was rich, had family and so security: a lineage of men able to buy better wives than they deserved. . . .

Then she does her best to make something out of her sessions with her analyst: "Ted, insofar as he is a male presence, is a substitute for my father: but in no other way. Images of his faithlessness

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with women echo my fear of my father's relation with my mother and Lady Death"; but apart from these tacky formulas "I am getting nowhere with Dr. B." She resolves to settle down and work for a doctorate in psychology! "It would take about six years. A prodigious prospect. . . . Awesome to confront a program of study which is so monumental: all human experience." But neither Ted as a rather too generous male presence nor the prospect of mastering all human experience saves her for long from the monumental prospect of the end of prospects and presences: "If I can't build up pleasures in myself: seeing and learning about painting, old civilizations, birds, trees, flowers, French, German—what shall I do?" Nobody can help; and it seems fitting that even after her death they did their worst. Hughes, the "Consulting Editor," confides in the Foreword that he "destroyed" her last notebook which had entries "to within three days of her death [by suicide] . . . because I did not want her children [who are his also] to have to read it." Frances McCullough (whoever *she* is; she is never identified in the text or on the jacket, and having read the book I can now understand why not), the "Editor," informs us in her "Editor's Note" that, besides cutting "some of the more devastating comments" ("Plath had a very sharp tongue" which an editor needn't scruple to amputate), she has exercised her editorial prerogative by making "a few other cuts—of intimacies—that have the effect of diminishing Plath's eroticism [but she can't "diminish" it, Plath being dead and out of reach; what McCullough means is that she's deliberately trying to give the impression that it was feeble and ladylike], which was quite strong." These "few other cuts" (in 1982!) amount—I stopped counting—to five or six dozen at least: "Be sure he's nice nice nice. [Omission.]"; "Describe Paris room, breakfast [omission.]"; "I didn't have to compromise and accept a sweet balding insurance salesman or an impotent teacher or a dumb conceited doctor [omission]. . . . I did what I felt the one thing and married the man I felt the only man I could love"; "I, chilled, feel his warmth [omission] . . . haul me over to be held and hugged"; "What would the neighbors say? [Omission]"; "he will perhaps have some of his talk [omission] . . . I lust for him" (all ellipses and square brackets among these few other cuts are McCullough's; and where were *her* editors at The Dial Press while all this was going on?); four mutilations per page on pp. 229, 268, 270; many other multiple occurrences per page; and many many more. Ghouls.

John Berryman wasn't the type to leave Plath alone either, in his whimsical way with lady poets:

> Them lady poets must not marry, pal.
> Miss Dickinson—fancy in Amherst bedding hér.
> Fancy a lark with Sappho,
> a tumble in the bushes with Miss Moore,

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a spoon with Emily, while Charlotte glare.
Miss Bishop's too noble-O.

That was the lot. And two of them are here
as yet, and—and: Sylvia Plath is not.
She—she her credentials
has handed in, leaving alone two tots
and widower to what he makes of it—
surviving guy . . .

Plath had enough private misery to keep others out of it when she wrote her misery poems; but the poets in their youth that Eileen Simpson writes about[2]—she was Berryman's first wife, and unlike Plath she buckled down and got her Ph.D. in psychology—are a clubbier bunch and more inclined to share, as in a poem of Berryman's she quotes a stanza of and analyzes with professional confidence:

> the second stanza of "The Lightning," the one poem he showed me that summer, a gift for my birthday:
>
> Analysands all, and the rest ought to be,
> The friends my innocence cherished, and you and I
> Darling—the friends I qualm and cherish and see.
>
> Although the poem ends on an optimistic note: My love loves chocolate, she loves also me, / And the lightning dances, but I cannot despair," despair, except for moments as brief as a flash of lightning, was what he had been feeling for so long that if I could find a competent analyst, he would be relieved to go to him.
>
> Obsessive hate freed John from the sonnets . . . , allowing him to turn his attention to other work. One of the fruits of his early months in treatment was that he became somewhat more realistic about money. . . .

And one of the fruits of his early life was boredom:

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no

[2] POETS IN THEIR YOUTH, by *Eileen Simpson.* Random House. $15.50.

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> Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
> inner resources, because I am heavy bored. . . .

True, friends: he don't; he am; because, pal, if you're the sensitive type and qualm while life glare, one of the fruits of life is lemon, and life is what gets to you heavy every time if you don't get to it repeatingly first.

That doctoral program wherever Simpson matriculated had probably the same required class in elementary cliché that Plath must have taken at Smith: "The mistress, knowing that she was being gossiped about, played the role to the hilt" (these ladies dote on swordplay as you'd expect considering the Latin word for "sheath"); "links . . . beginning to be forged"; "dazzling precocity"; "impish grin"; "mingling with the throng"; "height of fashion" (all but the hilt are on the first two pages of text, which continues throughout to be up to the hilt with hilts). All right, so I'm quibbling about her style and ignoring the nitty-gritty; but the poets she memorializes and quotes don't sound much grittier. Delmore Schwartz, the one with dazzling precocity, was a charter member of the club and eventually rated a poem by Robert Lowell and a whole novel by Saul Bellow, but in Simpson's pages he reads like tubby little Bart the Fart, neighborhood wimp intellectual: "Only you, John, would have such a quixotic idea"; "John, you have a sacred obligation to write for us. It's your literary and financial duty" (Schwartz had become an editor of *Partisan Review*, which as you'll recall Plath turned into a demon lover and dreamed of "bedding with"; American poetry at mid-century was a sort of haywire family cocktail party where mingling with the throng was neither the last nor the least of it); "It's going to be a terrible job, John. A thousand pages! Four others have been over them . . . but your sharp eye . . . I'll be eternally grateful [ellipses Simpson's]"; "John, I neither understand nor am capable of responding to such music"; "East Coca-Cola" for *East Coker* as an instance of his wit. Furthermore "John" matches him thud for thud whenever a pronouncement has to get pronounced: "Predictably, the one for whom he had the highest praise is the one not in love with him. I begged him not to act precipitately"; "And how I dreaded going back there after vacations! Even today the mourning *whooowhoooo* of a train whistle, the signal that we were rounding the curve before the Kent station, overwhelms me with a feeling of desolation." As well as with a lack of precipitation for the act of procreation: it's the Chattanooga-choochoo syndrome, and one of the fruits is a competent analyst.

If Simpson and their poems are to be trusted, they were such bores. Simpson is willing to consult their fever charts and forgive them virtually everything—they're poets and you know what *poets* are like—but even she feels honor bound to admit that their shenanigans pall:

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> "Crazy" was not the word I would have used to describe Cal [Lowell] when . . . he came to Princeton again, although his mood was certainly elevated beyond what it had been at his most ebullient in Maine. That was to be expected, was it not, of a poet who at thirty-one had won the Pulitzer? At an outdoor party we took him to (one of the many that season that I didn't enjoy), he drank quarts of beer, took off his shoes and tossed them up in the air, while John, who had drunk an equal amount and had climbed a sycamore tree, tried to catch them. The sight of poets disporting themselves in this way may have entertained the other guests, but I was feeling that excess of alcohol made even these brilliant and attractive men tiresome.

Anything for an effect: there isn't much difference between this sort of behavior and the pert religiosity of *Lord Weary's Castle* ("The little wheel is turning on the great / In the white water of Christ's blood . . ."; "Once I came from Mass"; "the ghost / Of risen Jesus walks the waves . . . ") or the pert pathos of reminiscence in "Man and Wife" (where he tries something like one of Plath's misery poems; but, though hers are more like misery, poetry defeats them both):

> Oh my *Petite*,
> clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve:
> you were in your twenties, and I,
> once hand on glass
> and heart in mouth,
> outdrank the Rahvs in the heat
> of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet—
> too boiled and shy
> and poker-faced to make a pass,
> while the shrill verve
> of your invective scorched the traditional South.

In fact Lowell has to go quite mad before Simpson can make any of them seem interesting except as psychiatric cases:

> He talked incessantly, telephoned everyone he knew (which was why the line had always been busy when John tried to reach him to arrange a meeting), buttonholed strangers on the street, sent telegrams flying all over the country, declared a million times that he felt "marvelous," that he loved everyone, that he wanted everyone he knew to be happy and was determined to see that they would be—even if it meant interfering in their lives. No, he was not drinking, Elizabeth said, in answer to John's question. Not a drop. He was also not sleeping, not a wink.

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Allen Tate's life needed straightening out, so Cal called him and summoned him to New York, "to hear the will of God."

"Cal really is crazy, then," said John, who had been unwilling to believe the gossip. "Did he think *he* was God?"

He didn't claim to be, though he was certain he knew what the will of God was. When Allen declined to come East, Cal decided to stop in Chicago to see him, en route to visit his old Kenyon College roommate and close friend Peter Taylor, who was in Indiana. He left saying that he had to "bring Allen to know his sins. All must be known, and then all forgiven." Not only must Allen be brought to know his sins; Caroline must know them, too. Allen's love affairs must be exposed and repented of.

"*Oh no!*" John groaned. "He told Caroline? He named names?" We all knew some of them.

Yes indeed, he named names. Caroline had not been grateful for this information, and Allen had been beside himself with rage. Rage turned into terror as Cal, thinking he was being frisky, grabbed Allen around the waist in a great bear hug. In the ensuing fracas, Cal opened the window and shouted into the street. A crowd collected, the police were called and, after some deliberation, it was decided he should be escorted to the train for Indiana . . .

—and in Indiana the episode ends with Lowell in jail after hitting a policeman.

Simpson's tone here is the closest she comes to the tone of dry and uninvolved amusement her cast of characters keeps crying out for. Elsewhere, though, she's mostly taken in, too impressed (as they themselves are), thrilled by each quaint failure of awareness peculiar to poets, for example "a man as brilliant and uncompromising as Randall [Jarrell]":

I had heard of the young woman, Southern, who told Randall at a party that she "just loved" a poem of his that had recently appeared. Randall, who didn't enjoy parties, came to life. "Gee! Did you *really*?" he asked her. Thinking that anyone who loved a poem must have read it carefully, and many times, he questioned her about what specifically she had liked, how she had understood line five, and on and on, while the tongue-tied girl gulped down her drink and prayed for deliverance. . . .

If John was an electric wire, Randall was a whip. You know more or less what to expect from an electric wire. It is alive, it may send out sparks, it may explode, depending on its condition and the demands made upon it. A whip looks benign when it's standing in a corner. But when it's cracked—watch out!

The oblivious unintentional baiter of the tongue-tied girl isn't bril-

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liant and uncompromising or a whip, and there isn't much difference between this sort of behavior and the self-righteous shouldering aside and meanness of Jarrell's "compassion" for "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" or of such war poems as "Eighth Air Force" ("The other murderers troop in yawning") and the atrocious "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner"—

> From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
> Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

—which must have been reprinted in every Freshman English anthology for thirty years because it was short and analyzable and didactic, as well as repulsive enough to be reckoned honest.

Berryman and his friends had come along a generation and a war later than Pound and Eliot; they were just in time to scheme out meetings with and be awed by old Yeats; World War II and after was their chance (fat chance), they had the field to themselves, they would move in and take over; emboldened by the new freedom to say anything whatever, they would confess and suffer and habitually carry on like crazy and they wouldn't have to be too nice or noble-O. Still, in the arts a generation or more will sometimes be skipped, fresh impulses may not show up till fifty or a hundred years later, the wish isn't necessarily father to the word. How hard not to hope though! Being a poet isn't everything; not being a poet isn't the end of the world; but if theirs are tales of waste and woe it's probably because both propositions in the positive seemed self-evident to them. They took themselves and the literary life so seriously—being a poet was even more important than writing poems—that at any moment they can seem to be rehearsing the proper roles for their memoirs thirty years hence, at the same time working up in their heads first drafts of the great moments while these are merely going on, as when Edmund Wilson held a little gathering at his home where Berryman would read *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (which Wilson had compared to *The Waste Land*) "so that they could discuss the poem in detail":

> Recalling that occasion Elizabeth Bowen remembered John as having been "tortured and half-incoherent." Leon Edel, the other guest, was struck by John's "personal anguish," and the way Edmund "quietly and tenderly" led him [by the hand?] from stanza to stanza. What neither realized [now at last we get the inside story] was that John had expected that we would be alone with Edmund and Elena. He was not yet ready to read the poem in so intimate a setting with strangers in the room. Only his unwilling-

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ness to offend the Wilsons, whose sympathy toward him he had been feeling so strongly, pushed him into his "tortured" reading.

What a life! those literary evenings at the Blackmurs' or the Rahvs' or the Wilsons', where the critics were quiet and tender and the poets tortured and half-incoherent. Plath was luckier out of it, lying around the house dying to hear from *The New Yorker* or imagining that the world was her oyster (with a string attached)—

Something else

Hauls me through air——
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel——
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

(which is flightier and more overwrought than the lyrical flights in the journals but no better)—or dreaming like an ill-favored orphan about Marilyn Monroe.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Poetry of Opposites

CHINESE POETRY IS A POETRY OF OPPOSITES: man at home or out of doors, on foot or sitting still, alone or in company. Words trail off into insignificance in wind-swept mountains and forests, yet nothing is more precious than a poem. Mark Perlberg in his first collection of his own poems and translations from the Chinese[1] proves that paradox endures in every true poet. Whether gazing at landscapes of the Northern Sung or looking at the Maine coast, the poet cannot forget the fragility of consciousness and the mastery of human speech. "Words do not serve," complained Li Ching-chao in "To the Tune 'Ku Yen Erh,' " and he despaired, "There are no words for my emptiness." Still the music wakens within his refrain as we now listen to his lament; the empty are filled and the silence opens to sound. In "The Garden," Perlberg movingly describes how his sister calls back their mother from her dying oblivion to one last moment of loving recognition by reminding her of the seeds, trees, and swallows of her garden: the words restore reality. In "The Revenant," the son returns to the house his father built to find that only his memory remains true to the place, while in "Welcome" the odor of lilacs recalls his father's presence. By embracing opposites of seen and unseen, poetry makes palpable and permanent something of the passing scene, as Wang Wei did a millennium ago in "An Autumn Evening in the Mountains":

> A fresh rain in the empty mountains
> Has brought with it the chill of autumn.
> The clear stream flows over rocks and pebbles.
> Water lilies shake beneath a passing fisherman's boat.
> From the bamboo grove—the chatter of girls returning with their wash.
> The fragrance of spring has run its course.
> But you, old friend, stay with me a while.

Nothing more than an invitation and yet the experience of literature—like Frost's "Come In"—calls out to the reader. Perlberg invites us to share his visit to the past in "To T'ao Ch'ien From Vinalhaven," in "The Master" (who "painted a cave and disappeared inside"), and in Tu Fu's incomparable poetry, but he does not limit himself to the Chinese; he offers a "View of Amsterdam" worthy of

[1] THE FEEL OF THE SUN, by *Mark Perlberg*. Swallow Press/Ohio University Press. $15.95; $6.95.

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a Rembrandt drawing, a wry picture of Emily Dickinson's father, poems on Vietnam, graffiti, the Mid-West, and growing up. The journey itself becomes the theme, fully developed in a long final poem, "Casco Voyage." It is worth joining Perlberg in his travels.

In a collection of poems (his second) and prose reflections,[2] Richard Pevear observes that we should not retreat to the past, but neither must we lose it. He writes, "Living in the world is far different from living in history. Look at what the world has become under those who 'live in history'! We need, not a party of opposition, but a world of opposition, a world of flesh and blood and memoriousness." Pevear defines "memoriousness" as "the dimension of *depth*" where "continuous remembering" takes place. By going inward poetry opposes the vagaries and vagueness of unexamined existence. The poet here defines the fine line between art and life, and then he walks that line with wonderful balance. The central poem, "Think of the random steps we had to take," tells of a chance encounter after twenty years: "You saw and recognized me (I did not / See you, or recognize you when you stopped me)." The poet exclaims: "How can I praise enough / Your sudden invention of the gift of speech?" Such epiphanies rediscover what disappeared into personal emptiness and forgetting; "Love loves in loss / Without diminishing it," Pevear asserts in "The Green Blouse," a poem that itself establishes love in the telling. Love, uttered, rescues both the individual's own past and our common human origins from oblivion. Pevear is at heart a classical poet, at home in ancient Rome while living in a modern American city, relying on his own familiar symbols "the way / A Greek trusted his legs in battle." After twenty years in that city, "Not spared but overlooked so far / By the gods of my time," the writer continues "happily / Refining the sharpness of my vision, / Unhappily wondering, what next?" The final poem of this sequence of "Stanzas" ends the book with a prayer:

> I see that all this is possible
> Only because I have turned
> Away from you, Lord. And thou hast
> Apparently wished it to be
> So. And I say I will not fill
> Your mouth with my words, because
> I have turned away, but let your word
> Come and turn me back.

We touch deep bottom with these lines, at the opposite point of what is passing above on the surface of history.

We are "Self-thinking and forgetful at one time," Wyatt Prunty remarks in his thoughtfully mature first book of poems.[3] In "To-

[2] EXCHANGES, by *Richard Pevear*. Spuyten Duyvil. $5.00p.

[3] THE TIMES BETWEEN, by *Wyatt Prunty*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $10.95; $5.95.

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wards a Relative Ending," he leads the reader through "rooms we know too well" in a life we hardly notice until a shadow falls across the floor from "clouds passing miles overhead." The poet jolts us into realization of the light we missed seeing. Women and men play the same role for one another when flesh and blood makes them aware of differences. In "Our Tree of Opposites," the poet acknowledges, "The wren sings. You stand apart. / I follow a path that runs interior"; but at night he and his loved one "brave a sleep / That interlocks all the day divides." Prunty's opening poem provides an apt symbol of opposites, "The Kite": "By pulling down it rises up, / This craft of putting fragile things aloft, / Of letting go and holding on at once." A boy's drowning in a river, a daughter's birth, a childhood summer on a Tennessee farm, visiting an aviary, fishing, gardening, coming home from work, these are the boundaries Prunty sets for himself and he moves freely within them. In "Reruns," he abruptly shifts from the red and gold fall twilight to the television screen showing the latest war scenes like a serialized film. In contrast, "Murals for a Greek Museum" admires the elegant ease of antique lovers who, unlike their modern counterparts, "fostered gods while nature turned." "Forest Fire" celebrates nature's power to transform: "All night the hills are loud with falling trees, / Are bright with foliage eating from its branch." And "The Jumper" praises a suicide who threw himself "out of bounds, beyond our rules / more absolute than we like to think." By letting go, Prunty staunchly enables his readers to hold on at once. Like "The Woodcutter" whose story the poet tells, he cuts for us "a way / for walking into woods, and walking out." These masterly poems provide the way.

James Baker Hall's first full collection of poetry[4] moves in two directions—the book is in two parts—outward and inward, toward many women and to one, in attraction and rejection. Woman is life-giver and destroyer, "the goddess of opposites," who possesses the wholeness the poet's soul lacks and seeks:

> At the center a woman tends
> & guards the fire
>
> Only change is at work here
> in the night sky, only
> the goddess of opposites
>
> is whole
> ("The Cloudless Sky Takes Charge")

In her many roles as mother, grandmother, wife, mistress, sister, daughter, we give her many names: Hall tries them all out and she

[4] HER NAME, by *James Baker Hall.* Pentagram Press. $18.00; $6.00.

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wears each title comfortably. A photographer, he develops his snapshot album with an eye for contrast and detail: an old wife works a jigsaw puzzle blank-side up; a young wife listens to the news while washing dishes; a mother commits suicide as her son plays in the yard. Personal and emotionally charged, these memories are presented objectively; the pictures appear cruel and call for forgiveness; they seem sexually graphic and filled with tenderness. This is a book written by a man out of his own anima: in the mirror of the pages he reflects his own soul. Sometimes the language is plain:

> No one is here Or there
> Or anywhere Only faces
> pressed close to the glass
> & behind them more faces

Sometimes it is exotic:

> Hungry ghosts gather Lightning
> on the horizon Wind
> trashes the dark streets
> within my body Mannequins
> float with white arms
> outstretched So this is the blood
>
> that sees me
> I take shape
>
> within an empty face
> dark clouds within me
> within lightning
> White arms outstretched

Both of these passages are from the same poem, "In Her Absence." The poet sees himself as the lens through which light filters, and he employs montage techniques to create multiple vision. The result may seem to appeal to the eye more than to the heart, but Hall plays no tricks; he speaks of what he sees and has seen. Not all the poems yield a meaning at first glance and some may be lost in their narcissism, but these images bear reflection when they focus on the eternal feminine: "And there she is / revealed once again / in the center." In her infinite variety.

None of Hall's women show much resemblance to Carolyn Forché, whose Lamont-prize-winning volume[5] seethes with anger at man's inhumanity and stupidity. And what instances she reports in her poems about El Salvador: corpses eviscerated, living men

[5] THE COUNTRY BETWEEN US, by *Carolyn Forché*. Harper & Row. $11.50; $5.95.

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stacked like corpses, human ears collected in a sack. Hardly by chance, she previously lived with a man writing a book on the Holocaust who in turn could not free himself from the constricting nightmare. Clearly—even calmly—the poet raises her voice in opposition to this hysteria. She divides her book into three parts: "In Salvador, 1978–80," "Reunion," and "Ourselves or Nothing." The opposites in her poetry find expression in the last title, a long poem about our freedom still to choose. Here "nothing" means exactly that; it is not an existential concept but possible annihilation of all life after every value we have held has been wiped out. "Message" bleakly critiques "ideas or men that amounted to nothing." "For the Stranger" describes a meeting on a train when two opposites, an older worker from a communist country and the author, attract: "We have, each of us, nothing. / We will give it to each other." The scene offers a parable on the world situation when the Superpowers sit down to talk. "Nothing" resonates through the poems: "I have nothing," "I give nothing," "There is nothing." In "Joseph," a poem about a Vietnam veteran who calls her for comfort, Forché closes with the observation that even the phone "has nothing to say to you." In her fluently reportorial style the poet exercises perfect control over her material, which ranges also into her own past life in Eastern European cities—Belgrade and Prague—and her Mid-West childhood. Her style levels everything out and is highly readable; however, the alternatives for "ourselves" never glow with life. Bleakness is all. The moral force that lies behind the lines too often fails to break through. "Return" grieves that "you were born to an island of greed / and grace where you have this sense of yourself / as apart from others." That very alienation becomes the one difficulty of these honest, searching poems. Their opposition needs more inwardness.

In his second poetry collection,[6] Mark Jarman confronts head-on the choice each generation must make between greed and grace, repeating or rejecting past decisions. "What you inherit / in turn was inherited," the poet reflects in the title poem. He learned his Sunday-school catechism by rote, walking back and forth: "One thing never changed, / the walk never changed." Jarman recalls "my father's arm, his father's voice" on those Sunday mornings. Finally, however, "the end of the task / is to forget the task" and to "stop walking." The poet's father and grandfather "chose the ministry," and these two men (the book is dedicated to them) dominate these poems. Religion offered strength and support to the grandfather, who underwent a further conversion before his death. The author wonders about him, "but can your [*sic*] choose your obsessions?" Jarman's choice is not to believe at all, yet he appears haunted by his inner world of opposition. In "Address to the Devil," he begins,

[6] THE ROTE WALKER, by *Mark Jarman*. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. Distributed by University of Pittsburgh Press. $12.95; $4.95.

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"I have shrugged off God, that nonentity," but he has not become free of his questioning. In "Does the Whale Diminish?" the young man cross-examines his curate-father's judgment in choosing his church elders, vetoing the wife-beater, drunk, bigot, and skeptic. The son, on the other hand, identifies with the sinners who have offered to serve:

> But let us all volunteer,
> without robes or crowns, in our affordable
> suits, ignorant with the bigots,
> drunk with the drunks, and violent, too,
> with the violent, all of us suspect.

Ironically, the son's attitude comes closer to the Gospel message than does the clergyman's. The father's character, however, shines through in many other poems with warmth and understanding. "Description of Heaven and Hell" is typical of the even tone of these sharp family portraits:

> The wave breaks
> and I'm carried into it.
> This is hell, I know,
> yet my father laughs,
> chest-deep, proving I'm wrong.
> We're safely rooted,
> rocked on his toes.
>
> Nothing irked him more
> than asking, "What is there
> beyond death?"
> His theory once was
> that love greets you,
> and the loveless
> don't know what to say.

Framed by two memory-dense poems, "Greensleeves" and "What Child Is This?," this sensitive tribute of verses mirrors the past in the present, the half-forgotten in the remembered: "It is possibly this / that I mean. So much meant / to be lost is saved." The poet's sacred task is beautifully summed up in that final verb.

Between waking and sleep, sunlight and rain, love and loss, Jayanta Mahapatra probes his own dark heart for the happiness he fails to find anywhere else. In his reflective, melancholy sixth book of poems[7] he gropes for direction, listening and watching, but he

[7] THE FALSE START, by *Jayanta Mahapatra*. Clearing House. $5.00p.

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finds few signs to enlighten his way. In several key passages, fog and storm await him, and when the sky clears only the enigmatic moon appears; more likely than not, all he finds in his heart is ignominy and ignorance. And yet,

> There is always the feeling
> of something spreading inside the chest,
> like blood or sweat
> or the smell of iron on iron
> after the train has left,
> and it says:
> you are here alone, and you are happy.
> ("Something Spreading Itself")

These poems about false starts, failed relationships, unexplained events, and life's oppositions baffle and fascinate; they blend into one another so that the reader, mesmerized, seems to be reading the same poem over and over. Mahapatra works with archetypes rather than with specific persons, places, things. Except for an occasional temple, we could be anywhere; in "The Moon Moments" he asks, "Why does one room invariably lead into other rooms?" Precisely the question the reader asks. The poet has no answer other than our common fate: "We, opening in time our vague doors, / convinced that our minds lead to something never allowed before, / sit down hurt under the trees," only because we happen to arrive there in the first place. The poem ends with a cry of protest:

> How can I stop the life I lead within myself—
> The startled, pleading question in my hands lying in my lap
> while the gods go by, triumphant, in the sacked city at midnight?

Mahapatra reaches for the heights at such moments, and at times he falls short, straining for effects, as if the polished phrase or extravagant image might be enough of a response. He loses the reader, or his metaphors grow banal with "the mist of time" and "the tree of hope." But these mysterious, unsettling lines more often draw the reader onward and inward to probe his own dark heart, to listen to the rain seep into the soil for the "art, ceremony or voice that lies / under my aimless hearing of the rain" ("A Day of Rain"). Even the most explicitly personal poems, "Tonight I Hear the Water Flowing" and "Measuring Death," which meditate on the deaths of a father and a son, shun any simple solution: the poet is not fulfilled by suffering or made wiser by grief. Most mysterious of all, the last poem, "A Certain Refrain," addresses the "you" that opposes all the poet says and does by pitting silence against sound, descent against ascent, darkness against light; he demands: "How far can your hand reach out, / trying to hold me back?" Finally,

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"something greater than darkness / passes between us," and the poet contemplates the naked seas "exhausted of all the light / which made them full of power and longing, / full of the breath that moved the world." We are back in Genesis, in the beginning, within the inner world, before history.

To turn from the inscrutable East to the riddling West, here is Nicholas Rinaldi in his second book of verse[8] being just as surreal but utterly dissimilar in content and tone. Where the Indian poet moves from abstract to sensible imagery, the American fashions a fun house of bizarre characters and situations that shed their materiality in fantasy. Here again poem blends into poem, and the sense of experiencing a dream, different and yet the same, leads the reader on through the book. Instead of mystery, however, the final poem, "A Purple Silence," presents us with a Gauguin-like reverie of "islands in the sun" with naked girls and plums on silver platters. How we arrive at this paradise defies cartographic explanation, for our guide's intent is to have us lose our way. For starters, he lets a crow's shadow fly from our pocket, discovers talking corpses on subways and in swamps, explores a jungle temple for gold, and buys a dismembered old lady. The chief opponent to these misadventures turns out to be "them," the voices that say no to the imagination and shout for conformity. In a nine-part poem, "They," the hero is peeled apart, interrogated, chased, ordered about, and befriended, until he turns the tables on them: "They try to escape, and they are mine." Often in the lines we hear the complaint of a contemporary psalmist beset by his enemies: "They sucked the marrow from my bones, / and stole my eyes. / They nailed my tongue to a wall that was blue." He mourns in "My Time": "They take my time / and put their fingerprints / all over it." "Joan of Arc Responds to the Grand Inquisitor, Explaining Who She Is" begins, "I am not an oriental rug or a xerox copier," and goes on to note, "I am not a bargain basement." Rinaldi satirizes our modern materialism by verbal collages, movie scenes clipped out of context, dislocated fables, and crippling clichés. "The Camel" offers an original analogy to the Incarnation: a real camel becomes a household pet, disappears, and remains an object of worship. "Litany" chants a spoof of commercially inspired petitions, including "Lord of all creation / Relieve us of our constipation." Some may find Rinaldi too glib a madcap, and his facility does at points prove fatal, but his absurdities have punch and leave you black and blue. His opposition springs from a different depth, that of laughter.

Leonard Nathan's eighth book of poems[9] listens to both sides of the Self, or to the two sides of the brain, and lets the conversation flow between them. In "Toast" he describes hearing a woman cry all

[8] WE HAVE LOST OUR FATHERS, by *Nicholas Rinaldi*. University Presses of Florida. $7.95.

[9] HOLDING PATTERNS, by *Leonard Nathan*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $10.95; $4.50.

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night in the next motel room, studying the faces that morning in the coffee shop, and toasting her long after over coffee cups in strange places: "still / I say, lifting, this is for you." Women in their dreams and troubled marriages; women housekeeping, nursing, gardening, and waitressing; a girl singing in the library stacks; a friend hugging him after twenty years: Nathan portrays the "mother, sister, soul" as flesh and blood, dark-shadowed and illuminated by love. He declares in the opening stanza of "Solemn Music":

> Especially in rain my faith
> is with women talking on the other side
> of a wall, sometimes low and in sorrow,
> sometimes laughing without reason,
> a music almost becoming words.

Others, he goes on to say, may believe in knowledge from nature or facts, but he learns from women's voices "reciting sorrow inside" while they wait for him "to enter and join their secret devotions." In a number of long narrative poems—some of them featuring an elderly alter-ego, Mr. Bailey—Nathan scrutinizes domestic everydayness seen through dreams and dying. The poem, "Holding Pattern," dedicated to "Somebody's Old Aunt," describes an aged mother waking to a mocking bird's call, rising and preparing breakfast. Elaborate figures, cadence, and syntax (the poem is a single eighty-line sentence) transform the ordinary task. "Table Talk" catches a couple in crisis at a candlelight dinner: she daydreams of who she was "after all these years / typecast as daughter, wife, mother, / double agent in the lost war / of the sexes." Unlike the butterflies, the poet observes in "That the Unexamined Life Is Not Worth Living," we humans understand the "backward grace / of flight and fall," as well as "the pity / of not knowing, and also / the pity of knowing." You learn to trust Nathan as a chronicler of bruised but not broken lives whose compassion comes through in his balance of opposites and who knows when to stop and start a new scene. He wonders aloud in "The Affair," "what are we anyway / but things as they are, persistent spirits / hopelessly in love with the other world?" And also in love with one another: "We don't speak the same language," he says in "The Understanding," but "by some miracle understand each other." These poems express that love with a strong sense of how men and women depend on their differences and how words and gestures become the music we live by.

Variety is the spice of Brad Leithauser's first collection of poems,[10] an accomplished work that does justice to its art and the life it records. Whether matter-of-factly recounting his summer jobs

[10] HUNDREDS OF FIREFLIES, by *Brad Leithauser*. Alfred A. Knopf. $11.50; $5.95.

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or delineating his refined alertness to nature, Leithauser possesses an eye for how people and things act and an ear for how they sound. No repetitions here, for each poem represents a fresh setting-forth in subject and style; yet the manner is consistent in capturing the city at dusk, daybreak over the ocean, or fireflies lightening nightfall. The poet is at home indoors and out, on a tennis court or in a swamp, in a law office, natural history museum, forest, or ghost town. He can be detached or involved, popping with details or dryly pensive. "Canoeing at Night" tells of battling the water until "we get our timing back" and "steer for the center." Then the rhythm modulates to imitate the gliding ride:

> Smoothly opening up to us,
> The river falls forward;
> Trees swing by, bobbing,
> As if they float on water.

Leithauser's poetry is as clear as water and as fluent in movement. He is refreshing to read when he fixes his binoculars on a frog or dips his hand in duckweed; he makes you thirst for more sights and sounds and closer contact with "drenched fields, nearly drowned in dew." "An Expanded Want Ad," the opening poem, invites the reader to purchase—or, rather, rent—a country cottage with a river view and paths leading into pastures and woods. What a world lies between the three-line advertisement and the twenty-stanza poem! In its evocation the pastoral recalls, of course, Thoreau but also Marianne Moore in its precision and virtuosity. Also worth remarking are "The Ghost of a Ghost" for its first-hand account from beyond the grave and "Along Lake Michigan" for its compelling sketch of a couple's encounter with a dead deer. There are, in fact, hundreds of surprises and delights in Leithauser's collection of flickering observations that bid us look with wonder at the world we luckily walk through for a while.

In a series of four lengthy monologues,[11] Richard Moore plunges us into the past with a search for "memoriousness," of living in the world and not merely in history. In first-person accounts, Aaron Burr, Jay Gould, Archimedes, and Cleopatra take the stage and unfold their tales of greed and grace. Unlike Robert Lowell's *History* sequence, Moore suppresses his own voice to allow the characters to ruminate on their own stories. They speak in traditional blank verse, from Shakespeare to Browning the proven vehicle for such recitals. The backgrounds glow with real events and the narratives, each spoken at a critical moment in the dramatic persona's life, illuminate important moments in time, at a personal and public turning point. Listening to Burr, we review the Revolutionary War and the early struggles of the republic, a gloomier and more cynical

[11] EMPIRES, by *Richard Moore*. The Ontario Review Press. $10.95; $6.95.

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panorama than historians present, and one that bears strong resemblances to today's petty politics. "Traitor" and Vice-President Burr claims to have been betrayed by a two-faced Jefferson while images of Agnew and Nixon throw comic shadows on the wall. In Gould we find the greed that makes millionaires out of stock market manipulators who cash in on the legacy of moral ruin this financier bequeathed them. Prophetically, he foresees business "caught in this subtle labyrinth" he has fashioned. With Archimedes we discover an ancient Oppenheimer confronted with the chasm between thinking and the collapse of civilization as "the ruins crumble like forgotten theorems." Cleopatra embodies the feminist dream of changing a male-dominated society by her own influence and intuition. All four protagonists were empire-builders in politics, business, science, and culture. Each one soliloquizes in a trial of failure following years of success: Burr after his plans for sovereignty over the Mississippi Valley had toppled; Gould in the knowledge that he has converted the disaster of Black Friday into an economic course of action; Archimedes with the perception that "this itch to know the rule of things" will not curb human violence; and Cleopatra at the realization, with Caesar's assassination, that her dreams of peace have shattered. Moore creates believable thoughts and feelings for each self-communing character although, inevitably, some lines boom vacuously: "If that is villainy, then call me villain"; and some rasp flatly: "We had no bank. No Democrat could get / loans." For the most part, however, the theatrics are minimal and the current of speech sweeps the reader along old and new triumphs and follies. Moore's sense of humor helps keep his tragedies on course.

In his first poetry collection,[12] Jay Parini contrasts classical eros with modern industrialism, dividing his book between Ovidian *Amores* and the anthracite landscape of northeastern Pennsylvania. A prologue, "The Sabine Farm," draws on the literary analogy between farming land and cultivating verse, but notes that poets no longer enjoy patronage as Horace did. This theme of language as landscape develops further with poems about excavations into the rock of boyhood memories in and around Scranton, and recollections of relatives and friends, meetings and deaths. Like Jarman a minister's son, Parini contrasts visions of Zion with the mine pits, slag heaps, coal trains, and grimy-grim Lackawanna River. Nevertheless, the poet looks back with affection more than with anger, recalling "Spring in the New World" when children of the block went down to the swollen Susquehanna, past the wrecked cars and junk:

> The children flowed,
> a tributary stream of blood,
> and skin encountering the air

[12] ANTHRACITE COUNTRY, by *Jay Parini*. Random House. $10.50; $5.95.

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and icy water. Children
washed the winter from their
bodies, floating on their
backs beneath the rail bridge
arching overhead, the iron
rainbow of a diesel world.

No paradise or promised land, and yet a place for innocence and temptation. The miracle of naked bodies in a world of rock and metal strikes Parini with amazement: how could eros evolve from such harsh beginnings? An encounter with a Polish girl, "Tanya," becomes the stuff of fairy tales in the midst of "chips of coal, / old bottles and beer cans." She gives him mushrooms and he kisses her forehead. Teenagers explore love-making on Snake Hill where they park in a quarry or in meadows where they sidestep the cow-dung. Yet an air of innocence breathes through these scenes, for the youngsters hold hands, kiss, and talk their way in and out of passion. In childhood, despite warnings from fathers, the boy plays in an abandoned shaft until overcome with his own "black fear." He experiences death in "The Miner's Wake," a quiet elegy for an uncle killed in a mining accident, as in "Naming the Losses" the poet later mourns a friend killed in a plane crash. In his poetry Parini answers the summons to remember and to declaim, with honesty, humor, and grief. We share his gratitude in "Illimitable Kingdom" for the silence out of which poetry comes and goes:

Alone in this wordless room,
I am grateful for the life
that will not give in, that keeps
on coming when the words are gone,
this world within world,
illimitable kingdom.

Out of the depths which human flesh is heir to, the emptiness that we feel and the fullness that we seek, the poet offers "this world within world" of loving opposition. These dozen authors (five of them publishing remarkable first collections) deserve to be read by all who heed poetry's call to come in and reminisce with a friend.

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DANA GIOIA

Poetry and the Fine Presses

THERE HAS BEEN A SIGNIFICANT CHANGE in poetry publishing during the last ten years which has gone almost unnoticed by the general literary public—the increasing importance of fine presses. This trend has been invisible to most people because the books are printed in small, limited editions and not sold through bookstores. Few people, even the poets who are being published, realize how large the movement has become, and most serious readers would probably dismiss it offhand as a trivial phenomenon. But in some small but important ways the growth of fine press publishing has changed the poet's position as an artist and the economics of his profession. It has also made it increasingly difficult and expensive, albeit more exciting, for a reader to know what is going on in contemporary poetry.

Since this subject is unfamiliar to most readers, a few definitions are in order. "Fine press" is a broad term, but I use it here to describe a small, independent publisher dedicated to producing books printed in the best possible way. (Some writers prefer the term, "private press," but this seems unnecessarily confusing since most of these so-called "private" presses sell and publicize their books rather than distribute them privately.) Fine press printers believe that commercial publishers have sacrificed the art of making books to profits and that most modern technology has cheapened and impersonalized printing. These printers look on printing as an art which relies on the direct, creative interaction of the craftsman and his medium, an interaction best facilitated by hand printing on letterpress.

Fine printing involves more than just printing, of course. It encompasses all the elements that combine to make a book: the design, the printing, the paper, the ink, and the binding. Fine press books are done in small, limited editions, usually signed and numbered by the author as well as by any artist who has collaborated. The presses commonly sell their books themselves through the mail both to collectors who are interested in the press or the author and to book-dealers who specialize in fine printing and modern first editions.

This awkward form of distribution may seem as antiquated as a letterpress, but it suffices for selling such small editions and accounts for the tightly-knit world of fine printing where everyone knows or at least knows of everyone else. It also serves to hide from everyone but dealers and a few hardcore collectors the magnitude of work being published. There are literally hundreds of letterpress

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publishers operating full or part-time in the United States today, publishing thousands of books, most of them poetry.

When so much contemporary poetry appears only in limited editions, one can't help speculating on the nature of publication itself. What constitutes the publication of a book? If an author has a book printed in an edition of only six copies (like the anonymous sexual memoir, *My Secret Life*) is that event really a publication? Not, I think, in any real sense. It would be a private affair. The book may be printed, but the situation is more like that of a Renaissance poet circulating a manuscript among friends. What about a dozen copies? Or fifty? The line of demarcation is obviously arbitrary, but it is based on differentiating those books intended for a private audience known by the author and those aimed at a "public" which includes strangers. One test is whether a book is sold or given away, but that may merely measure the wealth of the author. Essentially, publication means that enough copies of a book are available for it to be seen and read by some audience, however small, beyond the private circle of the poet and printer. One hundred copies would seem the minimum to ensure these conditions.

But while one can consider a fine press edition "published," it is publication of a special sort. A volume of poems printed in an edition of two hundred copies will probably have only one hundred fifty put up for sale (the remainder being divided between the printer, author, illustrator, and reviewers). If these copies are sold at forty dollars each, they will hardly attract readers of casual interest. They will be sold mainly to fans of the press or the poet. The economics of fine press printing therefore limits the poet to a special audience of initiates. It is like preaching to the converted. For established poets this can create a comfortable middle ground between their immediate circle and the general public. Distressed by the deluge of new verse flooding the bookstores, many important poets look on fine press books as a more attractive means of reaching their audience. Eventually most of their work will be issued in trade editions, but in the meantime it is impossible to follow their careers without tracking down these limited editions.

Fine press books occupy this curious middle ground in publishing halfway between private printing and conventional commercial publication. Traditionally, trade publishers have served the mass audience while fine presses have catered to a small group of bibliophiles with a taste for exquisite printing. Lately, however, three factors have upset these traditional roles and brought them closer together—the increasingly fragmented audience for contemporary poetry, the commercial unprofitability of publishing new poetry, and the boom in collecting modern first editions.

Contrary to popular opinion, there have never been more poetry readers in the United States than at present. The problem, however, is that no two of them seem to like the same poet. This huge

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audience, comprised mainly of students, professional or part-time poets, and academics, is too fragmented for large commercial publishers to reach effectively. The trade houses realized years ago that they cannot make money publishing new poetry, and have confined themselves to a few profitable, established writers and an occasional prestige volume knowingly printed at a loss. It is an ironic situation. More volumes of poetry are being sold than ever before, but the average audience for any one volume has grown so small that the roles of fine presses and trade houses have begun to overlap.

While the average sales of commercially published books have been depressed by the fragmentation of literary taste, the sales of fine press volumes have risen from the impact of book collecting. The past ten years have seen an explosion in the number of affluent Americans with a passion for modern first editions. Bookdealers were quick to capitalize on this trend, led by a group of Californians, most notably Peter Howard of Serendipity, the J. P. Morgan of bibliodom, who started seeing what the market could bear. Prices shot up as rapidly as for Krugerrands, and what was once a poor man's hobby became a fashionable investment strategy. Soon even the financial world began tracking "modern firsts" as a hedge against inflation, with fine press books, which are by their very nature limited in supply, attracting much of the attention. One might accept the fact that one of the 250 copies of Robert Lowell's first book, *Land of Unlikeness*, published forty years ago by Cummington Press, now fetches over three thousand dollars. The book has a classic stature in American letters. But when Charles Bukowski's *Love is a Dog from Hell* "wrapped in the original acetate" and published in 1977 sells for nearly one hundred, it is time to figure out what has been going on.

What has happened is a change not so much in degree as in kind. Fine press editions have ceased to be books and have become works of art—not unique artifacts like paintings, but controlled, limited reproductions like lithographs, etchings and photographs. The work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction became legitimized, in a way Walter Benjamin never foresaw, simply by being signed and numbered by the artist. This development also changed the stature of some poets in a subtle but significant way, the final results of which it is still too early to predict. Just as the migration of poets to colleges after World War II changed the course of American literature in a way critics are still sorting out, and the development of poetry readings as a major form of "publication" has created, for better or worse, new genres of poems by transforming writers into performers, the rise of fine presses has made the poet kin to the visual artist. Although the poet, unlike a Picasso or a Dali, cannot become a millionaire from this transformation, he now has a prestigious and possibly lucrative new medium for his work.

The possibilities inherent in this situation have not been lost on

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certain enterprising authors. John Updike, the most widely collected American writer, has published enough fine press items to rank somewhere near American Motors on the *Fortune* "500." A widely collected poet can now issue almost every piece he writes in a limited edition before trade publication occurs. This may seem like a gross exaggeration, but check a comprehensive bibliography of a "hot" author. Over half the poems in Ted Hughes's *Moortown*, for example, had appeared earlier in expensive limited editions although the copyright page of the U.S. edition makes no mention of them. This "double dipping" gives a poet a very gratifying secondary medium (in much the same way readings do), and even a way to supplement his income if he is willing to sell his author's copies, which usually represent around ten percent of the total printing. Fine press publication also puts an author in touch with a different audience from his trade book one—an audience who may not read poetry as much as collect it. Sometimes a poet may even achieve a degree of popularity with collectors beyond anything he has with mainstream readers. Diane Wakoski may not be much of a poet, but, thanks to fine presses, she has a bibliography longer than the Pentagon shopping list.

Unfortunately the growth of book collecting has also spawned a group of small presses, specializing in limited editions, whose work is exceedingly shoddy. A poorly designed chapbook amateurishly printed by letterpress is hardly *fine* printing, but a collector interested in an author's work will seek this eyesore out as assiduously as he would a book of distinction. A young printer, who picks his authors carefully, can effectively use collectors to subsidize his apprenticeship. In many cases these books are more poorly designed and printed than trade books. Their only distinction is their scarcity—a quality which may appeal to collectors but hardly to afficionados of fine presswork.

A poet who has published with a fine press will often find himself in the unexpected situation of having his book quickly sell out. Whereas he always complained that his trade publisher was too commercial, interested only in sales and turnover, he now ironically wishes that the small press were more commercial and willing to reprint and promote his obviously successful book. He will also be puzzled by the reviews. Fine press books are not generally reviewed in mainstream literary periodicals. They may receive some local attention or a notice in a journal especially interested in the author, but they are usually reviewed only in magazines concerned with printing. Here the author reads with perplexity and ire a detailed discussion of the layout, typeface, paper, and binding of the book with only a passing mention of his immortal text. He knows then that in a world of craftsmen he is the outsider.

A poet publishing with a fine press also finds himself collaborating with another artist, which may be either the chance of a lifetime

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or a nightmare. Reading Wallace Stevens' letters to Harry Duncan (who published not only three of his books—*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, Esthétique du Mal,* and *Three Academic Pieces*—but also a private Stevens family history, *Epitaphiana,* in an edition of only ten copies), one feels Stevens' excitement with their collaboration. He often wrote Duncan to discuss aspects of the designs and offered many suggestions. When he received *Esthétique du Mal* in 1945, he wrote:

> The books are marvelous. I cannot tell you how pleased I am by them. I had made a list of people to whom I wanted to send copies. Now that I have the books, I think I shall throw the list away. At least, I am going to keep all of them for a while, until I am quite sure that they go to people who are good enough for them.

Other poets, however, have felt that printers have distorted their work. Fine printing walks a difficult line between two ideals—the work of visual art and a book meant to be read. When a printer lacks what Walter Hamady has called "respect for the clarity of the author's intent," he can easily displace the text with his own highly interpretive design. Quite often one sees fine press work that is stunning; one wants to hold and admire it, view it from different angles—do everything, in fact, but read it.

Whereas commercial publishing is centered in New York, fine press printing is scattered throughout the country. If one area has a slight preeminence, however, it is probably San Francisco. This city's long tradition of fine printing, plus the general revival there in the sixties for all kinds of craftwork, have made the Bay Area a thriving center for fine literary presswork. There are at least thirty ongoing letterpress publishers now operating in the Bay Area, most of them specializing in new poetry. These printers range from old masters like Adrian Wilson and William Everson to younger printers like Kathy Walkup of Matrix Press and Leigh McLellan of Meadow Press.

San Franciscans show as much creativity in naming fine presses as they have in naming rock bands. Two of the more interesting local presses are christened Poltroon Press and Pterodactyl Press. Alastair Johnson and Frances Butler, who run Poltroon Press, specialize in innovative typographic and artists' books, but also do some more conventional literary publishing. Floyd Pearce's Pterodactyl Press sounds ferocious but actually prints books in elegantly simple traditional designs. Matrix Press also sounds forbidding—like a joint venture between Wyndham Lewis and Adrienne Rich—but this small press in Palo Alto produces fine books and broadsides in intimate designs. Run by Kathy Walkup, who is well-known for her earlier work at Five Trees Press, Matrix originally specialized in po-

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etry by women, but has recently broadened its scope. And for the truly adventurous there are other presses including Cloud Marauder, Sombre Reptiles, the Turtle Island Foundation, and the unforgettable Whirling Dervish Press.

While one might expect a large, sophisticated city like San Francisco to be a center for fine press printing, most people are surprised to learn that Iowa City (population 47,744) is probably the second most productive and concentrated area for literary letterpress publishing. Iowa City's importance in fine printing began in 1945 when Carroll Coleman started up the Typographic Laboratory as an adjunct to the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. Coleman's commitment to publishing new work rather than elegant reprints started a tradition which has continued among Iowa's letterpresses until today. Iowa's activity quickened in 1956 when Coleman was succeeded by Harry Duncan, who moved his famous Cummington Press from Massachusetts. At Iowa, Duncan not only published an impressive list of books, but also trained a whole generation of printers, most notably Kim Merker who in turn took over the program when Duncan moved to the University of Nebraska in 1973. Merker now runs two presses—the Windhover Press, which is the University's official letterpress, and the Stone Wall Press, his private imprint. Merker's editorial judgment has been as distinguished as his printing. One of the earliest Stone Wall Press books was *The Collected Poems* of Weldon Kees, an important volume which might never have appeared otherwise, and his later volumes have ranged from established authors like Ezra Pound and Donald Justice to younger poets like Peter Scupham and Michael Van Walleghen.

Other Iowa presses include Allan and Cinda Kornblum's Toothpaste Press which recently published Dave Morice's charming burlesque of "A Visit from St. Nicholas" entitled *A Visit from St. Alphabet*, a book which is sure to become a typographer's classic. Bonnie O'Connell's Penumbra Press, which specializes in the work of younger poets, also deserves mentioning. Penumbra has done handsome editions of writers like David St. John, Tess Gallagher, Peter Everwine, and Debora Greger. Part of Penumbra's success with young poets may come from its sage editorial policy. While most trade publishers and university series run sixty or seventy pages in a book of poems, Penumbra only allows a poet around thirty. The results prove that necessity can be the mother of invention. Many major presses could learn a lesson here.

The most interesting fine presses are those whose editorial taste is on a par with their craft. Some people can enjoy the design of a book in blissful isolation from its text, but this seemingly reverent approach actually betrays the printer's craft and reduces book design to a static art. A book, however seductively designed, is not a print, and its full meaning unfolds itself only in the reading—in the complex interaction between text and design. A bad or inappropri-

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ate text can sabotage the most ingenious design, just as thoroughly as bad printing can ruin the pleasure of reading a wonderful text. With this in mind, I would now like to discuss three fine presses in detail—one each from the West, the Midwest, and the East—whose work is equally interesting as printing and as poetry. Each press has a different attitude towards design and shows a different kind of editorial taste.

Harry Duncan is probably the most famous fine press printer in America today. In 1939 Duncan helped found the Cummington Press at the Cummington School of the Arts in Massachusetts. Starting with a superannuated hand press needing major repairs, Duncan and his partner, the late Wightman Williams, soon began turning out a series of hand-printed books of "lucidity, precision, plenitude, and finish." While it was remarkable enough that two young artists would throw their energy into reviving the dying and unprofitable art of hand printing, what made Duncan's presswork especially noteworthy was his superb choice of contemporary texts. As a poet himself, Duncan had a certainty of taste most printers lack. In its first ten years the Cummington Press issued first editions of *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* by Wallace Stevens, *Blackberry Winter* by Robert Penn Warren, *The Winter Sea* by Allen Tate, *The Good European* by R. P. Blackmur, *Doctor Drink* by J. V. Cunningham, and *Land of Unlikeness*, the first book by a young poet named Robert Lowell. These books, along with others by William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Tennessee Williams, and Yvor Winters, not only established Duncan as one of America's most talented book designers and printers, but also one of its best editors.

Nothing testifies to Duncan's integrity more strongly than his current situation at Abattoir Editions, the curiously named press he established at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1972. While most printers of Duncan's fame would have been content to grow prosperous issuing expensive books under an established and widely-collected trademark like Cummington, Duncan started a new imprint, issuing books at prices which seem surprisingly low. Assisted by talented younger printers like Mark Watson and Kathleene West (who is also a poet), Duncan has issued a stream of interesting books, almost entirely poetry. Although not every young poet Duncan prints turns out to be another Robert Lowell, his record at Abattoir over the past ten years seems at least as good, if not considerably better, than the recent records of some major series like Yale Younger Poets. And he has also done superb editions of older writers whose reputations are in eclipse, like Brewster Ghiselin, Radcliffe Squires, and the late S. Foster Damon. This independence of taste makes Abattoir an important presence in American poetry, despite the limited circulation of its books.

In *The Wolf Last Seen*[1] by John Quinn (with vignettes from draw-

[1] THE WOLF LAST SEEN, by *John Quinn*. Abattoir Editions. $10.00.

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ings by James Trissel), Abattoir once again provides an elegant introduction to a fine young poet. Quinn's book, his first collection, falls into three sections, the first two containing poems about Oregon, the last containing poems on Iran. Although Quinn's Persian poems make interesting reading, they exhibit certain problems which affect most American poets writing about foreign landscapes. Talking about a landscape on which the poet and the reader have so little common ground, the author must either continuously explain the significance of unfamiliar details or else romanticize the plot away into some misty but familiar archetype. The first method leads to a kind of fact-hungry verse journalism which exploits local color in an impersonal way, the second to vague characterless tone which makes the ostensible subject matter seem largely irrelevant. Either way it is difficult for the poet to communicate much personal involvement with the scene at hand. Quinn manages these "tourist" poems better than most do, but it takes a writer with the linguistic resources of an Auden to turn verse travelogue into anything but a minor form.

When Quinn writes about the Pacific Northwest, however, his work becomes deeper and more individual. Iran may excite his curiosity, but Oregon stirs his imagination. He writes about his native landscape in a quiet, conversational way enlivened by his understated sense of humor. He also has the gift of brevity. Some of his poems like "Vapour Trail" and "Future Nostalgia" build on a single clever idea, and Quinn knows exactly how long to sustain each piece to get the maximum effect without overextending his material. He writes most impressively, though, about more serious subjects such as "The Wolf Last Seen," in which the last timber wolf spotted in Oregon thirty-five years ago acquires an apocalyptic significance, or "The Man Who Wanted to Grow Mushrooms," which shows the poet's grandfather longing in old age for another chance at life. Reading the opening of this second poem, watch how deftly Quinn gets complex effects out of simple linear syntax by carefully managing his line breaks:

> It was something to do with the land
> in the basement, under a house
> he was hemmed into, his life
> overrun by women and gardens
> and green vegetables.
> Something in him grew where
> nothing else would. Something
> grew dark. Some dank husbandry
> gave him strength without light
> without roots—something could
> make its own life and make it his . . .

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A young poet who can use technique so skillfully to articulate the aphony of emotion deserves watching.

Abattoir has also issued *Games of Chance*,[2] a new collection of poems by Thom Gunn, with an etching by John Thien. *Games of Chance* is an extremely handsome book. Only 6¾″ by 4¼″, it is printed on light brown Barcham Green paper from black Walbaum type with elegant Romulus Open initials done in contrasting brown ink, and then bound with a brown natural finish cloth that is a pleasure to hold.

Games of Chance is a good example of the kind of insight a fine press book can bring to an established author's work. Gunn is a very versatile writer both technically and thematically. *Games of Chance* allows the reader to study one side of him in isolation. These eleven new poems, all written in free verse, show Gunn in a reflective mood. Like an operatic tenor whose voice has darkened with age, Gunn is moving into new roles in his recent work, and though he may move among the same scenery as before, he now sees it from a different perspective. He shows the same curiosity as ever, but it is now tinged with cynicism, as in "Expression," where Gunn turns his attention to the work of young poets:

> For several weeks I have been reading
> the poetry of my juniors.
> Mother doesn't understand,
> and they hate Daddy, the noted alcoholic.
> They write with black irony
> of breakdown, mental institution,
> and suicide attempt, of which the experience
> does not always seem firsthand.
> It is very poetic poetry.

Later in the poem he cunningly balances these opening lines with the image of a mediocre early Italian altar piece where a stolid Madonna and child "stare outward, two pairs of matching eyes / void of expression." Elsewhere Gunn strikes a more tender note. In "Elegy" the memory of an acquaintance who shot himself becomes a general lament for all of his dead: "They keep leaving me / and they don't / tell me they don't / warn me that this is / the last time I'll be seeing them." But ultimately Gunn undermines whatever tenderness he shows with the bitter reminders of reality. In "As Expected" the slow gains a young man makes with a ward of retarded adults are destroyed by his successors. Or in "Adultery," a variation on the Elizabethan echo poems that have always fascinated Gunn, a wife's carefully orchestrated lie is rendered pointless when Gunn suddenly reverses the points of view and reveals how little her hus-

[2] GAMES OF CHANCE, by *Thom Gunn*. Abattoir Editions. $10.00.

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band cares for her. *Games of Chance* is a powerful book. Get a copy if there are any left. (Readers interested in Gunn will also want to know that he has just published a long poem, *Talbot Road*, in a limited edition with Helikon Press.)

I do not pretend to know the full range of work by young printers in this country, but none that I've seen impresses me more than that of Nadja, a fine press located in New York City, run by Carol Sturm and Douglas Wolf. New York has not traditionally been a center for innovative fine printing, but recently an influx of new talent and the support of organizations like the Center for Book Arts have livened up the scene. There is now a varied group of publishers dedicated to bringing out new poetry in attractive editions, presses as dissimilar as the upbeat Red Ozier Press with its illustrated edition of Robert Bly's *Mirabai Versions* or the more traditional Helikon Press's *Selected Poems & Ballads* by Helen Adam, bound in marbled paper over boards (if you don't know Helen Adam's unusual work, you're in for a treat). Nadja represents the forefront of this minor renaissance in New York publishing.

Nadja's books are sleek, simple, and elegantly contemporary. Although each book I have seen is different, they all share enough common design elements for one to talk about a "Nadja look." The typical Nadja volume is about 10″ by 7″ and bound in heavy, colored paper folded twice to hide the stitching. The books are always short, usually only a dozen pages. The typeface is most often a clean handset Helvetica, printed in two colors—one for the titles and colophon, the other for the text. This sans-serif Helvetica typeface gives the books their distinctively modern appearance. The total design is classically simple, eschewing all the cloying "traditional" design elements that mar the work of many young printers.

Editorially, Nadja represents the major trend in fine press publishing. It brings out exquisite editions of work by well-known writers that will eventually appear as sections of trade books. For example, Nadja published Howard Nemerov's sequence, *By Al Lebowitz's Pool*, in a limited edition in 1979. The next year the sequence appeared as part of Nemerov's new book, *Sentences*, from the University of Chicago Press. While this is an unadventurous policy, it does allow Nadja to print fine texts by important poets and provides a ready market for their work among collectors. One only hopes that as the press becomes better established they will become less conservative in their choice of texts.

Critics moralized endlessly about W. D. Snodgrass' last book, *The Führer Bunker*, asking whether a poet should write with such obvious fascination about Hitler and his *ungemütlich* gang. They seemed surprised as schoolgirls that poets could be fascinated with evil. (Does no one read Milton or Marlowe seriously any more?) This critical breast-beating was touching to behold, but it mainly served to deflect attention from the underlying literary issue of how a writer as

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good as Snodgrass could have written poems generally so lax and ineptly sentimental. After this macabre romp with Adolph and Eva, I hesitated in picking up *If Birds Build with Your Hair*[3] from Nadja, but I am happy to say that this new collection shows Snodgrass at his best again—witty, wise, and endlessly inventive.

The poems in *If Birds Build with Your Hair* are contemporary pastorals. Owls, barns, cherry trees, and dying elms may not be the subjects one would expect from a poet who has become famous writing on Matisse, Goebbels, and professorial lust, but then Snodgrass has never been predictable. Writing about country life, he manages to avoid the stereotypes of nature poetry and addresses his subjects with fresh intelligence and humor. A discursive poet at heart, Snodgrass occasionally has given two or even three images where one might do, but this indecisiveness is often part of his charm—as in "Old Apple Trees," which despite its fancifulness contains the most realistic apple orchard I know:

> Like battered old millhands, they stand in the orchard—
> Like drunk legionnaires, heaving themselves up,
> Lurching to attention. Not one of them wobbles
> The same way as another. Uniforms won't fit them—
> All those cramps, humps, bulges. Here, a limb's gone;
> There, rain and corruption have eaten the whole core.
> They've all grown too tall, too thick, or too something.
> Like men bent too long over desks, engines, benches.
> Or bent under mailsacks, under loss.
> They've seen too much history and bad weather, grown
> Around rocks, into high winds, diseases, grown
> Too long to be willful, too long to be changed.

This passage shows why one returns to Snodgrass' best work with such pleasure. It is not simply because he is so clever and entertaining, but because he is so true to experience.

Nadja has done an excellent job in printing Snodgrass' book with Univers monotype on rich beige paper, but unfortunately they have bound it with an odd zig-zag cross-stitching, which makes the book difficult to open easily and read unless one uses both hands. A moment's inattention and blam! the book slams shut. This hardly creates a genial atmosphere in which to contemplate country life.

Galway Kinnell's *There are Things I Tell to No One*[4] is Nadja's wittiest design. Sturm and Wolf have taken literally Kinnell's subtitle, "A poem in five parts," and produced an elegant book in portfolio style: each of the poem's sections is printed on a separate unattached sheet that fits handsomely into a rich black folder. Pulling

[3] IF BIRDS BUILD WITH YOUR HAIR, by *W. D. Snodgrass*. Nadja. $65.00.
[4] THERE ARE THINGS I TELL TO NO ONE, by *Galway Kinnell*. Nadja. $60.00.

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this folder out of its envelope and reading each section from an individual sheet is an intimate experience rather like reading a friend's poems which have just arrived in the mail. A moment of virtuosity from the designers, who make it all the more remarkable by producing a book that, despite its radical departure from their other work, unmistakably has that distinctive "Nadja look."

William Stafford's *The Quiet of the Land*[5] is a disappointing collection, however, in that the poems are not up to the quality of the printing. Stafford is a notoriously uneven writer, and this book shows him at his weakest. At times he sounds as if he were parodying himself:

> The best things we say, I
> take them out and whisper them
> into that hole in the pasture,
> right down there where those
> aspens have come up, trembling
> all day . . .

How sad that stronger work by Stafford was not chosen for this book. The Nadja format provides such an ideal environment for Stafford's spare but intimate work that *The Quiet of the Land* represents a major opportunity missed.

Editorially, Symposium Press, which began five years ago in Los Angeles, is the ideal fine press. It does not try to print all kinds of work, but only what it likes. And Symposium has very definite taste, preferring poetry written in the "plain style"—that clear, intellectual, and formal style that has formed an alternate tradition in English verse since the Renaissance. This frank bias gives Symposium books a special character—a character not unmixed with quixotism, for while many fine presses keep one eye on the marketplace to print what will sell quickly (both eyes in the case of the Lord John Press whose new title list is the Dow Jones "most active" list of literary reputations), Symposium has the conviction to print what it believes in with a blithe disregard to sales. Whether bankruptcy is looming in the near future, I cannot tell, but in the meantime Symposium is a good example of how a well-focused fine press can have an important literary impact by championing an unfashionable but deserving cause.

Symposium also displays another kind of editorial acumen, all too rare in the fine press trade. The texts it publishes form complete and well-integrated books. Most fine presses do not exercise as much care in shaping their manuscripts as they do in printing their books. Too many beautiful books contain a hodgepodge of unrelated poems arranged in what seems an arbitrary order. While there is

[5] THE QUIET OF THE LAND, by *William Stafford*. Nadja. $45.00.

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nothing intrinsically wrong with printing miscellanies, sticking to such a practice does mean that obvious opportunities are missed. The best fine press books are those which achieve the maximum synergy between the text and design. The more focused the text, the more effectively the printer can illuminate it. Fine press books are the ideal medium for a long poem, a sequence, or at least poems which contain some common theme or mood. A fine press book can isolate this work and arrange it to best advantage.

Symposium's editorial excellence may stem from the fact that it does not print its own books. Like Helikon Press in New York or the early New Directions, Symposium chooses manuscripts and then contracts well-known designers and printers to produce them. But if Symposium is an editor's press, it is one which exercises a great deal of attention to the quality and appearance of its books. *Witnesses*[6] by Edgar Bowers, for example, which has been elegantly printed for Symposium by the Amaranth Press in Santa Fe, shows how well a partnership with an outside printer can work. The design, typography and layout all perfectly complement the quiet but challenging text.

Bowers is not much read at present, but he is an excellent poet whose first volume, *The Form of Loss* (1956), remains one of the definitive books of American poetry from the fifties. As he has grown older, Bowers has published less and less, recently falling into complete silence (a silence which may help explain his current obscurity, since the public pays most attention to what is new). *Witnesses* represents a small coup for Symposium since this volume is the first new work Bowers has published for over a decade.

Witnesses is an intensely concentrated sequence of five short poems, each a soliloquy spoken by a character from *Genesis*. Although Bowers has cast the sequence in a quasi-dramatic form which lets each character speak from his own perspective, he uses each figure as a persona who implicitly represents some part of himself. Each speech becomes a lyric moment reflecting, sometimes obliquely, a stage in the poet's spiritual development. He begins like Adam in a problematic state of grace—half innocence, half ignorance—then falls into experience, finally returning in age to a transformed Eden now seen through the slow, passionless eyes of knowledge. The poems are difficult although they may not seem so at first. Bowers writes with such direct and engaging lyricism (which is reinforced by the design of the book with its open, lucid arrangement of the poems) that one hardly notices the complex movement of images and ideas until the end, when one is left with nagging questions about what is really being said underneath the brilliant surface of the words. Even in the first poem, "Adam," one goes from the bright immediacy of the opening images into the shadowy realm of

[6] WITNESSES, by *Edgar Bowers*. Symposium Press. $22.50.

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abstraction so quickly that it is impossible to understand it all the first time through.

> The shadow-tail, the cotton tail, the jay,
> The spider on her trembling web, the mote
> Swimming my blood—all innocent, all true,
> All unsuspecting! But someone was there.
> The burden of the past and future, father
> And child of choice, he offers count and name.
> It is as though, beneath a foreign tree,
> Gifted with tongues, familiar of the brute,
> I made a garden, kissed a face, and died.
> Children I might have had, remember me,
> That in your quiet house, your word emerge.

When I first read *Witnesses*, I was slightly disappointed. Subconsciously I must have been expecting Bowers to break his long silence with some dazzling work that would culminate his career. Instead I found this quiet, intensely private sequence. Rereading the poems over the past few months, however, I have finally been able to see them on their own terms, free from my preconceptions, and have come to admire their uncompromising quality. *Witnesses* is an exploration of the forms of loss and recovery. Building on the themes of his early work, Bowers returns to the public eye older, wiser, and as accomplished as ever. It is good to have him back.

Turner Cassity may be the most brilliantly eccentric poet in America. Just the "Contents" page of a Cassity book usually contains more poetry than the average contemporary volume (for no poet since Wallace Stevens has had such a flair for titles). *Steeplejacks in Babel*, for instance, contains such provocative but never gratuitous titles as "Pacelli and the Ethiop," "Leander of the Diving Board," "The Entrance of Winifred into Valhalla," and "In the land of the great aunts." Cassity is an unabashed virtuoso. His poems bristle with historical and cultural allusions, and he is never shy in displaying his gifts for rhyme and word play. The technical audacity, the recondite subjects he explores, and the sheer excitement of his language have made each book sparkle like a fireworks show. But at the same time, as much as I have enjoyed reading him, I have always regretted how few of his poems really showed all he was capable of. Too much of his work seemed arch and overwrought, its technique too brilliantly displayed for its own sake, and its exotic subjects too remote from his real concerns to have all the personal intensity he could have brought to them.

The Defense of the Sugar Islands,[7] however, marks a real breakthrough for Cassity. In this ten-poem sequence, which tells the story

[7] THE DEFENSE OF THE SUGAR ISLANDS, by *Turner Cassity*. Symposium Press. $35.00.

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of an American sailor stationed in the Caribbean during the Korean War, the execution is never anything less than brilliant, but Cassity does not let his virtuosity get the better of his material: for once the poems have as much emotional as intellectual force to them. The reason, I suspect, is that the protagonist is based on the poet himself rather than some figure from colonial history. In any event, Cassity has vividly recreated an island "where sand is scented and the war remote" and a young sailor caught between boredom and lust. The sequence develops in a series of scenes—the soldier trying on his new uniform before a mirror, a military funeral, etc.—each of which could stand alone as an individual poem, but which, taken together, constitute a fascinating portrait of a particular person, time and place. What impresses me most about this book is that Cassity is as adept at psychological realism as he is at high satire. And he can play the novelist without losing his poet's ear. *The Defense of the Sugar Islands* also shows the full range of Cassity's talents. He can still write comedy as well as ever but now manages lyric moments of uncharacteristic tenderness—as in "Off Duty," when the sailor realizes how much he has in common with the chameleon crawling on a nearby leaf:

> Content chameleon of the leeward leaf,
> Out of the wind and warping in the sun,
> Has curving to your harbor cost your spine?
> Too long the color, not enough the vein
> Of this green life we garrison, I, you,
> Search now for sustenance in altered air.

The Defense of the Sugar Islands, beautifully printed for Symposium by the Stinehour Press, is the finest book Cassity has ever written, and one of the best new collections I have read all year. Miss it at your own risk.

Many Houses[8] by Charles Gullans is another fine book by an author who has published very little in the last ten years. The book is dominated by the title poem, a sequence in ten parts, which is a meditation on "the midden heap / of old emotions." Set in Los Angeles, "Many Houses" catches exactly the strange spirit of that city, though Gullans never shows it directly but only as a reflection on the people and houses that inhabit it:

> I'm home and finding the Los Angeles
> Nobody loves where everybody lives,
> The concrete miles that crouch beneath Bel Air
> And Brentwood to the sea, if living is the word
> for bare accommodation in these rooms
> With nothing that we do not bring to them.

[8] MANY HOUSES, by *Charles Gullans*. Symposium Press. $40.00.

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Realism is not a fashionable virtue in poetry, but for me the great distinction of "Many Houses" is how it matches psychological insight, especially in the doomed love affair that forms the background of the sequence, with lyric sweep. The characterless suburban rooms of "Many Houses" are the world, like it or not, most of us inhabit, however much we dream of those "built for the large gesture, friends / In multitude, dinner and candlelight, / And old books open on the study floor." Gullans conveys their drab reality with clarity and precision, and yet shows how love and friendship can transform them into sacred spaces. These moments of communion may be transitory, but they are the events which truly define one's life. It is Gullans' considerable achievement that in "Many Houses" he has created a voice which can bring off these lyric moments of communion as powerfully as it can catalog the "detritus of daily living." "Many Houses" is a powerful and unusually memorable poem.

I would like to end this survey with the sad news that the Elizabeth Press of New Rochelle, New York will soon cease publication of new books. While I have not always enjoyed the poetry published by the Elizabeth Press, I have consistently admired the editorial integrity of its founder, James Weil, and the beauty of its books, designed and printed in Verona, Italy by Giovanni and Martino Mardersteig. Over the past twenty years Weil has set a standard by which to judge other private press printers. He has taken up authors he believed in and published their work in the best editions possible regardless of their commercial appeal. He has also kept poets in print for years that other houses would have ignored—quiet, difficult poets like William Bronk, Cid Corman and Lorine Niedecker—and championed writers as diverse as the Estonian poet, Aleksis Rannit, Felix Stefanile, and Spencer Brown.

While some people have criticized Elizabeth Press books for their similarity of design, this objection seems puristic to me, coming from an exaggerated conviction that a press must radically redesign its format to fit each new text. The classical simplicity of the Mardersteigs' designs give them a flexibility that more aggressively experimental work would not have. One simply never tires of the elements which give that "particular look" Martino Mardersteig wanted Elizabeth Press books to have. The clean layout, fine rag paper, and beautiful typography (often Giovanni Mardersteig's own Monotype Dante) make the books a pleasure to read. This "particular look" is so distinctive that I have trouble imagining William Bronk's work in any other format. The passing of the Elizabeth Press will be a loss to book lovers, but it also serves as a reminder that fine presses are usually the creations of a single individual and when that person retires or moves on to other things, the press must vanish too.

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GEORGE KEARNS

Fiction Chronicle

LOOKING INTO RECENTLY PUBLISHED WORKS OF FICTION, deciding which to go on with, which not to go on with, which to recommend—and there one stops, wondering: recommend to whom? and for which of the many reasons people read fiction? How precariously my pleasure depends upon what prejudices I open and close, and how the poor books on my table remain open or closed as prejudice exercises its royal prerogative of coining. "I have acquired a bad habit recently," wrote the Japanese storyteller, Junichirō Tanizaki, in 1926—

> I cannot bring myself to write or read anything that takes real facts for its material, or that is even realistic. This is one reason that I make no attempt to read the works of contemporary authors that appear in the magazines every month. I'll scan the first five or six lines, say to myself, "Aha! he's writing about himself," and lose all desire to go on reading. Generally I read things that have nothing to do with the present. When I read historical novels, nonsense tales, even realistic novels of fifty years ago, or contemporary Western novels far removed from Japanese society, I can enjoy them as so many imaginary worlds.

How unfair this is (and I am) to books as they appear, when they appear, as if they must wait for time, distance and some reader's inclination to complete them. "And what are prejudices?" asks Laura Riding's character, Arista Manuscript. "Prejudices are little subjects that make up in animation what they lack in extent." Yet without my prejudices I could not read: extent would numb me.

At the farthest remove from realism are Riding's extraordinary tales, parables, essay-fictions, epistemological extravaganzas, gathered now as *Progress of Stories*,[1] a volume including the pieces that appeared under that title in 1935 as well as material from *Anarchism is Not Enough* (1928) and *Experts Are Puzzled* (1930), and a late allegory of 1966. Her fictions are surrounded and permeated by Riding's queenly commentaries on her work and on paradoxes of writing and reading, of illusion and reality, and of "story-telling," which for Riding is "the sympathetic pleasure-counterpart of truth-telling—a version of it at low intensity." In her commentaries she is a somewhat long-winded talker, but one who would be nothing but

[1] PROGRESS OF STORIES, by *Laura (Riding) Jackson*. The Dial Press. $15.95.

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frank. Her pithy remarks only become evasive in the aggregate. Riding has a peculiar way—it seems to proceed from absolute self-confidence—of being terse and leisurely all at once, rather like Gertrude Stein, of whose sentences Riding's often remind me. Her elaborate demonstrations of "self-reflexive" fiction, as well as her theorizing about narrative, will surely be much referred to in up-to-date criticism, now that her work is more easily available. Yet how hard it is to be up-to-date we see in such remarks as the following, written in 1935, in "A Garland for Hans Andersen," long before such Barthian thoughts became familiar: "Let us," she says, "go on with our somewhat inhibited writing (or reading writing, which is surely not very different from writing reading . . .)"

Someone will explain some day the coherent vision behind the work of this astringently quirky writer who so effortlessly seems to avoid clichés of seeing, feeling and shaping. It has something to do with the power of the imagination to create and people worlds, something to do with independence even at the cost of a chilly isolation. "Our ascetically humorous slant became more and more a slant of independence," says the speaker of "Mademoiselle Comet," which I suspect the author might say of herself. The freshness, the quirkiness, the independence are more than style and mannerism; they seem to rest upon a vast self-assurance, some system or code at which the author hints obliquely. There is surely a long foreground here, as Emerson said of *Leaves of Grass*, something that allows Riding's slant of independence, but we need not know what it is in order to enjoy these early stories.

They can be funny, uncompromising, sometimes deeply moving, and sometimes gorgeously loopy in the ways they follow out their own non-Euclidean geometries. Their mode is usually that of the sophisticated fairy-tale or children's story, modernist in their effort to win their way back to primal wonder and simplicity, not by ignoring the burdensome knowledge of the twentieth century, but by taking a labyrinthine path through it. Riding would like to write tales like those of her admired Hans Christian Andersen, as Pound would have liked to have written something like "Go, Lovely Rose," but she knows that the effect can not, in her time, be achieved directly. Her stories will not appeal to all readers, but will appeal intensely to some, those "who should not have gone away long ago." Yet four of them, at least, can be recommended to anyone, and after that each reader will have to decide whether or not to go on with this most unusual writer. Three of the four are short: "Socialist Pleasures," "Mademoiselle Comet," and the Kafkaesque "The Fable of the Dice." The longest and warmest, the one in which Riding transcends herself, is "The Story-Pig."

"Socialist Pleasures" is a bittersweet sketch of the career of Fanny, who grows up in a Socialist family where pleasure must be justified on puritanical Socialist principles. Fanny's imagination and plea-

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sure-bent nature are often at odds with those principles. She loves her cat, Jenny, but:

> Fanny did not allow herself to be too fond of Jenny. Cats were not a Socialist pleasure. Fanny's family was a Jewish family, but they did not live as Jews or think of themselves as Jews. They were Socialists. Still, whatever was not Socialist was Christian. Cats were a Christian pleasure. She would tell her father and mother about the fun she had teaching her schoolmates politics and religion, but she never showed any enthusiasm over her cat. Nor did she talk to her schoolmates about her cat; that would not have been Socialistic.

The story tells how Fanny goes on to become a Spanish dancer and "Socialist pleasure-girl," finding ways to explain her life by clever adaptations of the Socialist principles drilled into her as a child. She can enjoy Spain, for instance, because she can see it in perspective:

> In Spain Christian pleasures were almost the same as Socialist pleasures. People spent their spare time and energies in ways that did not make them forget the kind of people they were. They had a low opinion of themselves, and they were proud that they were broad-minded enough to have it. That was a very Socialistic way of thinking. Spaniards also won all their arguments.

Fanny manages to have her cake and eat it, devoting herself to the gospel of "Socialist pleasure-centres." Riding's barbs aimed at an old-fashioned sort of Socialism are funny, but it could be the story of "Catholic Pleasures" or "Jewish Pleasures" just as well, a wry comment on the ways we drag our childhood trainings with us into whatever actual lives we find ourselves living. "Socialist Pleasures" is as close as Laura Riding comes to writing a story that sounds and moves somewhat like other stories.

The wonderful "The Story-Pig" is very hard to describe, for in it Riding effects so many transformations of characters into other characters, of real worlds into dream worlds, and the other way around. It begins: "On the mantelpiece of Hotel Moon, where people went to behave nicely, stood a large silver-plated pig with its mouth wide open." The guests at Hotel Moon gather round the Story-pig in the evening to tell "not exactly lies, but not exactly the truth."

> And how full of interesting things the world was—things that were not good enough to go to heaven along with people, but that surely people would never forget even when they got to heaven. Ah, all the dear human ways and doings that could obviously not be taken along to heaven. And yet one never entirely

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> gave up hope of taking them along; one never threw them away. Perhaps, when one was in heaven, one would, at least, be allowed to come back to look at them now and again—as at childhood toys. It would be a comfort, at any rate, to feel that one had once been foolish.

Against the background of Hotel Moon and the Story-pig, we read the love story of Hans, the doorman, who at times seems to become Hans Christian Andersen, and of Rose, the parlormaid, who is sometimes a Queen by night.

> And because the Queen did not like one-sided relationships, she became Rose, the hotel-maid, by day, just to make things easy for Hans when he changed from one world to the other; just to make the story truer. And so it was with Hans who had to change Rose into the Queen every night; and a very difficult task it was, and an infallible test of his sincerity.

But the love of Hans and Rose, the King and Queen, is blasted by the entrance of one of the hotel guests, a "pretty lady," and the Story-pig vanishes, that had been by night a sentimentalist, by day a snob.

> And as for Hans—was this Hans any more? so impolite and free with the guests, especially the lady-guests, that the management was seriously considering whether it must not dismiss him? And as for the Queen, and the king who walked beside her, and what the Queen's shawl said to the sewing-case after the next walk in the moonlight—do you not see, my dears, that the scene has shifted?

So the story ends, and it must stand among the finest and most magical pieces of prose written in our century.

I know little of Laura Riding's career, other than that she published (with Robert Graves) the still-refreshing *Survey of Modernist Poetry* in 1927, was closely associated with Graves for many years, returned to America in the late thirties, and renounced poetry and the sort of writing gathered in *Progress of Stories*—renounced them for higher things, writings with greater "truth-concern insistencies." What those higher things may be I fear to know, but I am very glad to have these stories by Laura Riding, written before she became the more vatic Laura (Riding) Jackson.

Contemporary with Riding's work in *Progress of Stories* are two novellas by Junichirō Tanizaki, *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* (1932) and *Arrowroot* (1930),[2] now published in exceptionally well-

[2] THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE LORD OF MUSASHI and ARROWROOT, by *Junichirō Tanizaki*. Trans. by *Anthony H. Chambers*. Knopf. $12.95.

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written translations by Anthony H. Chambers. In subjects, they seem quite different from each other, but the reader can sense the same controlling, ironic mind within the two tales. *The Lord of Musashi* is grotesque, energetic comedy; *Arrowroot* is intricate and muted lyric. To read Tanizaki is to know that you are in the hands of a master. I know some of his other works, *Some Prefer Nettles*, *The Makioka Sisters*, and *Diary of a Mad Old Man* only by their titles, but I look forward to reading them.

The Lord of Musashi takes us into a world that is familiar, *broadly* familiar, from Japanese historical films and *Shōgun*. Yet Tanizaki's imaginary historical reconstruction of sixteenth-century feudal Japan is unfamiliar in the fineness of its close-up presentation of the period. Of course, *Shōgun* is research and plotting, *The Lord of Musashi* art and Tanizaki's gift for making the past into a present. With deadpan gestures, he deconstructs the respectful official histories of the age of the warlords, exaggerates the feudal codes until the codes are demolished in comedy, and, with history in tatters around it, leaves burning in our minds the image of a psychosexual condition that is as timeless as it is grotesque. The unique ruling passion of Terukatsu, the Lord of Musashi, must produce in us a feeling of awe if for nothing but the ferocity and single-mindedness with which he pursues it. Yet the degree to which he becomes an automaton in that pursuit makes him grandly funny, too. I have seen a lot of books that claimed to make comedy from pornography, but none have ever amused me except *The Lord of Musashi* and *Lolita*.

Terukatsu, we are told, is the subject of official histories that present him as "the boldest, cruelest leader of his age," "known everywhere for his cunning and strength." Tanizaki pretends to have come upon two unpublished manuscripts from which he can piece together the "secret" history of this great lord, the story omitted from the official accounts. And that true story, explaining Terukatsu's private life and much of his political life as well (my reluctance to print such matters must be overcome), is the development of a tangle of associations in Terukatsu's mind between his own sexual desires and lovely ladies who are washing, cosmeticizing, and coiffuring severed heads. How this bit of private wiring got into Terukatsu's mind, why he can *really* get off on a severed head if it happens to have no nose, and how Terukatsu's secret passion affected the history of Japan in the Period of Civil Wars—are the matter of *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi*. Tanizaki brings this history to light in a series of scenes that are terrifying and comic. Donald Keene is right in saying that the scene in which the youthful Terukatsu first develops his obsession ranks with "anything written in this century." At the end of the story the narrator suddenly withdraws into ironic respect for the Confucian histories he is making fun of, for he can tell us no worse than what he has told us about the Lord of Musashi:

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> To the end of his forty-two years, the lord sought out new women, one after the other, with whom to share his bizarre stimulus and revolting dissipation. But that story would be too long and would detract from the lord's memory. The prudent thing would be to divulge no more. Once you know about the secret side of the Lord of Musashi's sexual life, you will, I am sure, make many surprising discoveries when you read the *Tsukuma War Chronicles* and other official histories. It is in this hope that I have written these pages.

Tanizaki called *Arrowroot* an "essay-fiction." It is a lovely, quiet, extremely complicated piece that takes us deeply into Japanese culture and ways of feeling. Not much happens in the story: the narrator is looking back through a clear mist of years at a trip made in 1912, together with a friend, to the remote Yoshino district of Japan. The narrator goes there to search for materials for a historical novel he wants to write; the friend, Tsumura, is searching for materials related to his mother and to his own childhood memories. The true subject of *Arrowroot*, however, is the difficulty of ever knowing the past, for whatever really happened in the Yoshino district—either in the fifteenth century or in the near-past of Tsumura's mother's girlhood—has become one with its transformations into myth, legend, songs and Nōh dramas. The ways in which literature shapes life and life becomes literature are worked out with the greatest imagination and delicacy. Real women become mythical foxes; foxes become the subject of stories and songs; the stories and songs shape the lives of real women; real foxes become spirit foxes; and so on into a vertigo of intertextuality of reality and legend. (The translator has provided an interesting "Note on Foxes.") To read this lovely short work requires great attention and a willingness to leave our own world far behind.

Two other books, like Riding's and Tanizaki's more than half a century old, have appeared in fresh, readable translations, as part of an ambitious cooperative effort between the Indiana University Press and the Foreign Languages Press of Beijing.[3] Both are classics of modern Chinese literature, "important" in ways few English-speaking readers will be fully able to appreciate. Both are monuments in the development of modern Chinese fiction, written in the vernacular rather than in the "literary" style, "progressive" political gestures at their times of publication. They are not, as are Tanizaki's, modernist works that might have been written yesterday; part of the excitement of reading them is to feel, or to imagine we feel, the force with which they entered Chinese history in the 1920s and

[3] THE COMPLETE STORIES OF LU XUN. Trans. by *Yang Xianyi* and *Gladys Yang*. Indiana University Press/Foreign Languages Press, Beijing. $17.95; $6.95. CAMEL XIANGZI, by *Lao She*. Trans. by *Shi Xiaoquing*. Indiana University Press/Foreign Languages Press, Beijing. $17.95; $6.95.

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'30s. However little we know about that history, we are forced to reconstruct it from the hints supplied by Lu Xun (Lu Hsun) and Lao She in their didactic dramatizations of the lives of the poor. They are the "realistic novels of fifty years ago" that Tanizaki, in the remark I quoted above, says can now be read as imaginary worlds. Both Lu Xun and Lao She fill their pages with energies, wit, compassion and observation—the excited observation that any literature has when "realism" is a novelty—and have a breadth and vitality that make them, indeed, fictions and not anything like mere preachments or models of socialist realism.

The Complete Stories of Lu Xun contains his first volume, *Call to Arms*, collecting the first fourteen of his stories, written between 1918 and 1922, and *Wandering*, eleven tales of 1924–25. He died in 1936 and (his publisher says) "his writings were held in disfavor until their sudden resurrection in the Cultural Revolution." The Indiana University Press, whose publicity, I assume, must be approved by the Chinese, say no more; but I understand that the Cultural Revolution revived Lu Xun as part of its rabid anti-Confucian campaign. ("Criticize Lin Piao! Criticize Confucius!" was the cry—and indeed one of the charges brought against Lin Piao was that he kept—in a cave, as I recall—a secret library of Confucian texts!) The stories are certainly anti-Confucian, but not quite with the strident tones of the Cultural Revolution. Lu Xun was out to demonstrate, as a modern Chinese intellectual trained in science, the need for a sharp break with tradition and superstition. "Medicine," for example, tells of the pathetic death of a child whose family relies on traditional folk medicine rather than, by implication, the kind of medicine that Lu Xun had studied in Tokyo, and was being promoted by his fellow members of the *La Jeunesse* and *New Youth* circles. Almost all of the stories are set among humble people in the village of Luzhen in the turbulent years that followed the revolution of 1911. In the distance armies clash by night; revolutionary and reactionary governments exchange places in the capital; reforms are in the air. In one of the funniest and most informative of the tales, "The Story of Hair," we learn the intricate political implications of keeping or cutting off one's queue. As a group, these stories offer us the opportunity to share Lu Xun's excitement as he participated in a New Era, as well as intimate details of Chinese village life. A lovely story, one that has no didactic purpose, is a memory piece, "Village Opera," in which the narrator remembers a tatty provincial production of an opera, one so woven with memories of a magical day that it will forever surpass for him the best productions in Peking. The first story that Lu Xun wrote, under the influence of his master, Gogol, is atypical in its ferocity—"A Madman's Diary." In it, eating becomes a metaphor for social and political relationships. The humor and humanity with which Lu Xun taught and observed his age were not to develop until later. Yet "A Madman's Diary" is a

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forceful piece, giving us the passionate vision that informs all the rest of his work:

> In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology and scrawled all over each page are the words: "Confucian Virtue and Morality." Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words—"Eat people."

Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi* has been previously translated as *Rickshaw Boy*, the title by which it is known in histories of Chinese literature. It is an earnest work, plodding in style, at least as here translated, but it allows us authentic glimpses into the life of the urban poor. Lao She came from a peasant family—he was the first member of his family who could read or write—and never lost touch with the working class. He knows exactly how things *worked* in the Beiping of the first decades of this century, exactly what everything cost—a working man's cup of tea, a tenement apartment, a day's rental on a rickshaw—and how largely the lives of the poor were affected by the most minute expenditures or unforeseen disasters. Xiangzi, the rickshaw-puller whose nickname is "Camel," is an illiterate, not-too-bright young man from the countryside, whose only asset in the city is his strength. We learn everything there can be to learn about the skills, ways of life and economics of rickshaw men. With Dreiserian detail, Lao She recounts the hardships Camel goes through in order to save enough capital to own his rickshaw—years of savings which disappear in a moment when the rickshaw is taken from him by a roving band of soldiers. He begins again, loses again, in a failing struggle to gain some freedom from the daily effort to make enough to pay the rental to the rickshaw owners. We are given interesting glimpses into middle-class life when Camel hires himself out to prosperous families of varying degrees of kindness and generosity. More or less tricked into marriage with an older woman, Tigress, truly a remarkable characterization by Lao She, he is trapped forever in the poverty of tenement life, and the novel ends with him, still a young man by our standards, looking forward to nothing but animal survival: "Watching a skinny stray dog waiting by the sweet-potato vendor's carrying-pole for some peels and rootlets, he knew that he was just like this dog, struggling for some scraps to eat. As long as he managed to keep alive, why think of anything else?" Lao She became a cultural commissar in the '50s and '60s, and committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. The present edition is a 1954 revision in which "I have taken out some of the coarser language and some unnecessary descriptions." There is a 1954 Afterword by the author and a 1979 Preface by his

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widow, both apologizing for *Camel Xiangzi*'s non-conformity to the rules of Maoist art. "Shortly after the book came out I heard some working people comment, 'Judging by this book we are really too wretched and hopeless.' I feel deeply ashamed about this."

Few modern novels (I'm not comparing him to the Monuments) have given me more pleasure or moved me more deeply than Ross Feld's *Only Shorter*.[4] The title is from Beckett's *Malone Dies*: " . . . to recognize the good in the bad, the bad in the worst, and so grow gently old all down the unchanging days and die one day like any other day, only shorter." To which Feld might have added another epigraph from Wallace Stevens: "His wound was good because life was." There is not a sentence or scene in his book that has not been carefully thought out, and yet neither his prose nor his vision of contemporary American lives has been screened by Writer's Workshop gauze. His eye for the American scene and his ear for the movement of American speech, together with his gift of selection, are cause for wonder. Yet his realism can shift easily and unexpectedly into a poetry that is never "poetic prose." Here one of the two leading characters, Jack Richmond, learns that the other, Judith Kornbluh, has at last died of cancer:

> On Friday morning, around ten-thirty, while the gift shop windows were being washed—dolls and peignoirs and chocolates obscured by suds of ammonia—Jack happened to be turned in his seat toward the elevator banks.
>
> Out of an elevator stepped her parents and the boyfriend. They were moving without power. The boyfriend held a shopping bag tightly to his chest . . .
>
> Jack was instantly to his feet and through the main doors, out onto the street: bread trucks, trees, sky, Chinese restaurant, cars, hotdog cart, people, sneakers, doctors, corners, buses, sky, Con Ed crew, sky—the whole thing overgrown horribly, room and more room.

There is a combination of restraint and outburst in the writing that perfectly captures the moment. Feld's touch is always just right. He peoples the novel with a number of fully-realized characters, and treats them with a rare generosity. We come to know them somewhat as we come to know people in this world, living along with them over time. Often they appear limited or silly on first meeting, ready to be "put down," yet we find, when we meet them in another context, that they have unexpected capacities for feeling, expression or action. Feld's characters are almost always richer or better than we suspected they would turn out to be. This is a writer who knows nothing of sentimentality, much about charity. He is gener-

[4] ONLY SHORTER, by *Ross Feld*. North Point Press. $15.00.

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ous of heart and generous in the fullness with which he realizes his scenes. I liked, to select just one of the remarkable scenes in this novel, a chapter in which Judith's "boyfriend," Anthony, a failed painter, has forged two pictures by his dead master and friend, Walter Dornish, and takes them out to Long Island to be authenticated by May, Dornish's widow and executrix. May, now remarried to a heart surgeon, has suffered from her first husband's self-absorption. After a weekend of aimless chit-chat, Anthony finally produces the paintings. We never quite know whether or not May recognizes them as fakes.

> "Well, I hope you weren't stupid. I hope you robbed them, and that you rob whoever on these, too." Throwing her head back, she shut her eyes and inhaled deeply. She opened her eyes. "I assume you need letters." Pulling at a drawer in the desk, she took hold of a note pad and a portfolio of stationery. "What years are these?"
>
> "Both nineteen fifty-four." Anthony stiffly accepted the note pad. For a moment the titles he'd made up and put on the pictures, and the dimensions, wriggled from his memory; but he recaught them, jotting them down on the paper with his own pen. He handed the pad back to May, who meanwhile had taken both pictures and laid them flat on the desk.
>
> "The paint is so fresh. He used to say he was philosophically opposed to technique. Who can count the things he said that weren't true, that he knew weren't true? Go. Take them," she said, swivelling away. "I don't want to see them anymore."
>
> . . . .
>
> May leaned over and kissed his cheek, then rubbed the kiss away with a thumb. Tears started in her eyes again.
>
> "This is all—no more after this—but please just let me. If Walter can be pardoned, the only one who has to do it is me. Not you. You can't afford to give him any more of your time. He's taken more than enough. Let me be the widow, all right?"

Much as I admire *Only Shorter*, I almost didn't read it. When the dust-jacket copy informed me that "the author traces the lives of two people who meet as patients in a cancer clinic"—well. But it's not a lugubrious book, not at all, even though it narrates in some detail the clinical histories of Jack, who is cured, and Judith, who dies. It celebrates life and its tough-spirited hero and heroine, introducing us to their several boyfriends and girlfriends, some casual, some not so casual, and to their worlds of work. Judith is employed by a New York museum, and through her associations Feld leads us wittily through SoHo and the commercialized bohemia of the New York art scene. Jack is a middle-management type, sent by his firm to correct abuses at a plant in a college town in upstate

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New York, and runs into the seamy side of small-town politics when he begins to moonlight for a real estate operator. In fact my first reaction to reading a book about cancer patients is part of Ross Feld's subject: both Judith's museum and Jack's corporation, when word gets out, treat them, oh so politely, as lepers, and fire them. I'll add only that where so many contemporary novels seem to begin with some idea and then just spin it out, unravel it, Ross Feld is a master of plotting. He is not a showy artist, and he need not be: *Only Shorter* is a brilliantly innovative narrative, but unobtrusively so.

Anne Tyler's ninth novel, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant,*[5] chronicles the lives of a small, miserable family for more than five decades. The Tulls live in a town called "Baltimore," but Tyler's interest in the detail of their lives is so myopic that she never gives us a sense of what this place, "Baltimore," looks like or feels like. This is one of those novels in which a few principal characters so fill the space of the fiction that they appear to be suffering in a world peopled only by themselves. Minor characters appear to complete a landscape, more precisely a room-scape: the Homesick Restaurant must have diners, a doctor must have patients, a grocery store must have customers. There may be a world out there in "Baltimore," yet *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, like many contemporary novels of family life, is so obsessively concerned with the effects of family members upon each other—what they have *done* to each other, how they have stunted or messed up each others' lives—that the great world blurs, and we find ourselves staring at a small self-generated system, an upholstered astrolabe. Anne Tyler, with an amazing capacity to remember the *things* of American life, accumulates details that can produce, paragraph-by-paragraph, a magical sense of how-it-was, of fading time. Here, for example, is a middle-aged man removing a drawer from his aged mother's desk:

> It wasn't, certainly, that the drawer needed cleaning, although to an outsider it might appear disorganized. Cascades of unmounted photos slid about as he walked; others poked from the moldy, crumbling albums stacked to one side. There was a shoebox full of his mother's girlhood diaries; an incomplete baby book for Cody; and a Schrafft's candy box containing old letters, all with the stamps snipped off the envelopes. There was a dim, lavender-colored corsage squashed as stiff and hard as a dried-up mouse carcass; a single kid glove hardened with age; and a musty-smelling report card for Pearl E. Cody, fourth year, 1903, with the grades entered in a script so elegant that someone might have laid A-shaped tendrils of fine brown hair next to every subject.

Tyler can do this sort of thing endlessly. It's precise enough to be

[5] DINNER AT THE HOMESICK RESTAURANT, by *Anne Tyler*. Knopf. $13.50.

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"evocative," but not precise enough to be beautiful. Three hundred pages of it become tedious: "At five-thirty she walked home, past crowds of youngsters playing hopscotch or huddled over marble games, past babies set to air in their carriages, women perched on their stoops fanning themselves in the heat."

The Tull family consists of Pearl, the mother who with combined determination and vagueness must raise her three children, after Beck, the father, abandons them suddenly—like the father in *The Glass Menagerie*, who fell in love with long distance. The three children, whom we follow from the 1930s into a middle-aged present, suffer through their lives from a sense of the father's absence and the mother's stifling presence. Cody, the older son, is hard, self-centered, even cruel. He torments his sensitive younger brother, Ezra, first in the ways that children can torment children, then in ways that family members can go on abusing their siblings in adult life. There's a mean streak in Cody: he even steals Ezra's intended bride, marrying her himself. Jenny, the daughter, goes through three marriages, and becomes a pediatrician; a generous doctor, she remains stingy in the attention she gives her own family. Ezra, the least successful of the three, remains in Baltimore, the proprietor of the Homesick Restaurant, the dramatization of his fantasy that he can establish—with home-cooked food and a table reserved for his family—some sort of place with a warmth that the Tull home never had. Ezra's obsession with the Homesick Restaurant is sentimental, but no more so than Anne Tyler's, I fear. The whole novel is a set-up for a "moving" scene that arrives in the final pages, as Ezra assembles the family in his restaurant after Pearl's funeral—and old Beck, who's been gone for damn near fifty years, shows up like a cantankerous ghost, spouting improbably lyrical prose. No question about it: *The Homesick Restaurant* can put a lump in your throat, if you have the patience for the massive display of unselective detail that leads up to the final chapter, called, sentimentally, "Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant." The Tulls have nothing very interesting to say, nor do they think about anything interesting, nor do any of them, except perhaps the dreamy Ezra, come alive in ways that allow us to feel we know them apart from the external objects and careers that differentiate them. That leaves us little to be interested in except Anne Tyler's writing. It is very fine writing, but so unvaried in its tone of elegy that it becomes monotonous even in the rhythm of the sentences. It almost seems as if it just slipped Anne Tyler's mind to include some of the other tonalities of life. The dominant tone is expressed in a speech she puts into the mouth of Cody:

> "Everything . . . comes down to time in the end—to the passing of time, to changing. Ever thought of that? Anything that makes you happy or sad, isn't it all based on minutes going by? . . . Ever

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> notice old photographs? How wistful they make you feel? Long-ago people smiling, a child who would be an old lady now, a cat that died, a flowering plant that's long since withered away and the pot itself broken or misplaced. . . . If only you could turn it back again, you think."

But nothing else we know about Cody lets us think that he could talk that way. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* might have been a long, lyrical short story, but it lacks the substance and variety that take us through a full-length novel.

T. Coraghessan Boyle is a virtuoso on a grand scale. *Water Music,*[6] his second novel, is a grown-up entertainment that knocks me out the way *Northwest Passage* and *The Bounty Trilogy* did forty years ago. Boyle can imagine any scene he wants to, any place, any time, and make it happen in a language that pops, crackles and snaps. He plays English the way Rachmaninoff played Rachmaninoff. *Water Music* is a historical novel unlike any other, for the language is simultaneously that of its period (circa 1800) and that of street-wise America (circa 1980). It's a panoramic tale of Mungo Park's first and second-and-fatal penetrations of Africa in search of the Niger River. Boyle's manner of giving us the late eighteenth century of Mungo Park with reminders that the tale is being told by an American in the 1980s may be a stunt, but it's a stunt so well performed that it never tires. Mungo is back in London after his first exploration:

> "We thought you were dead."
>
> "Yes, old boy, sorry to say it, we did."
>
> "Well, I mean, no word in two years' time—and then that devastating news from Laidley about your Moorish captivity. . . . Tell me, confidentially, now, do they really take their women from behind?"
>
> Another reception, another round of drinks, another bank of faces. As best the explorer can ascertain, this is the twentieth bash thrown in his honor since he got back a month ago—or is it the twenty-first? The pace is killing. But exhilarating. He goes from one lecture to the next, one drawing room to another. One night he meets a duchess, the next an earl. Mungo Park, son of a crafter, rubbing elbows with the high and mighty—and not twenty-seven yet. Heady, is what it is.

Mungo Park's story, with vastly researched detail, is interwoven with the life of one Ned Rise, a clever London criminal, a Mack the Knife whom Fielding would have known both as magistrate and novelist. Boyle switches back and forth between the lives of his two

[6] WATER MUSIC, by *T. Coraghessan Boyle* Atlantic-Little, Brown. $15.95.

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heroes, until he brings them together in Africa for the Final Adventure. We are getting history, Rider Haggard and all the movies ever made about African explorers and the women they left behind. Boyle has many tricks for distancing his research, such as calling a London seductress The Baroness von Kalibzo and titling a climactic chapter "Oh Mama, Can This Really Be The End?" Fanny, Ned Rise's lost love, comes to her end this way:

> The laudanum gave out. She lay in the alleyway back of the store, gasping for breath, her stomach punctured, heart torn out. She was a whore, an opium eater, a childless mother. All her beauty, all her stamina, all her resourcefulness had brought her to this. It was the nineteenth century. What else was a heroine to do but make her way to the river?

After all this meticulous research *cum* high jinks, Boyle surprisingly allows us to care about Mungo Park's end, as the seductive music of the Niger rushes him toward death. An astonishing performance.

Notes on Contributors

ALFRED CORN's third poetry collection, *The Various Light*, was published by Viking in 1980.

A story by SUSAN KENNEY* won the O. Henry Prize for 1982. She teaches English at Colby College and lives with her husband and two children in China, Maine.

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In 1983 LOUIS SIMPSON will publish both a new collection of poems and a volume of selected poems.

The research for EMILY GROSHOLZ's essay on Rilke was supported in part by a grant from the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies at Penn State.

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An essay by DANA GIOIA on business and poetry will appear in an early issue of this Review.

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Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

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"These new poems summon archetypal presences. Frederick Morgan is the poet of healing, compassion, and loyalty. His mastery has grown with each book, and here his voice achieves a lyric power to quicken our imagination and speak directly to the heart." — Guy Davenport.

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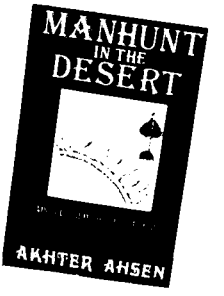

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